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Out of Reach: the Impact of Changes in Rent Supplement:Summ

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Out of Reach: The impact of changes in Rent Supplement



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Reg. Charity No. CHY 7220



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Acknowledgements

The researchers would like to acknowledge the following:

- Firstly, and most importantly, we would like to thank the ten households who participated in this research. Their commitment to the research and their openness during the interviews proved critical to its completion.
- We would like to thank all the individuals and organisations that work with people who are homeless who met with us and shared their experiences and perspectives. In particular, staff and representatives of COPE Galway, Peter McVerry Trust, Crosscare, Irish Property Owners Association, Citizens Information Centres, and Ann Irwin, independent researcher.
- To staff in COPE Galway who facilitated the interviews with people in Galway, and to staff in Focus Ireland who facilitated the interviews in Dublin.
- To Padraig Kavanagh and Liz Carey of the National Family Case Management Service for their support in the report.
- We would also like to thank the staff of Focus Ireland who supported the research process, in particular Sinead McGinley (Research Officer) and Wayne Stanley (Research and Policy Analyst) for their advice and support throughout the research process.

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About the authors



TSA Consultancy is Ireland's leading third sector advisory, research and consultancy service. TSA draws together recognised expertise in strategic planning, sustainability and social enterprise development, social research, business planning, funding, management and evaluation. TSA provides strategic advice and research to the agencies whose role is to develop and build the third sector in Ireland. TSA is also committed to working with locally based community projects at every stage from idea to start-up and development.

Executive summary

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Focus Ireland is housing and homeless charity working to prevent people becoming, remaining or returning to homelessness through the provision of quality services, supported housing, research and advocacy. The organisation provides a range of services that support people who are homeless to secure, settle into, and maintain suitable and affordable long-term housing.

With the decline in building of social housing in Ireland, the private rented sector is playing an increasing role in Irish housing tenure for many people on low incomes, and is increasingly seen as a key route out of homelessness.

People that reside in private rented accommodation and who cannot provide for the cost of their accommodation from their own resources may receive Rent Supplement from the Department of Social Protection (DoSP) to assist them in covering their rent payments.

There have been a number of changes to Rent Supplement rates in Ireland since 2009¹. The contribution to be made by the tenant has been increased and the maximum rent limits have been reduced on a number of occasions.

Key changes in the Rent Supplement system 2009-2012	
Maximum rent threshold	Reduced by 6-10%, and payments to existing recipients reduced by 8% - effective in June 2009 Reduced on average by 11% - effective in June 2010 Reduced on average by 13%, and reduced by 15-16% for single person households - effective in January 2012 ²
Minimum ³ tenant contribution (single household)	Increased from €13 to €18 - effective in January 2009 Increased from €18 to €24 - effective in May 2009 Increased from €24 to €30 - effective in 2012 ⁴
Application process	Central Rent Units have been established to process applications in some areas
Eligibility	Entitlement restrictions to those who are existing tenants for at least 6 months, or who are on the local authority housing list following a full assessment - effective in May 2009

The DoSP has argued that downward adjustments in the rent limits will not impact on the tenant, as the reduced rent subsidy is matched by a reduced rent in the sector as a whole. However, data from Daft indicates that average rents across most urban areas in Ireland have increased between Spring 2011 and 2012.

¹ Statutory Instrument No. 729 of 2011 provides for the most recent changes in Rent Supplement by the DoSP.

² According to the DoSP (Rent Limits Review Report, 2011).

³ Rent Supplement is a means-tested payment

⁴ Couples with one income currently contribute a minimum weekly payment of €35.

Comparison between average rent rates (€) across major urban areas			
Area	Q2 2011	Q2 2012	% change
Nth Co Dub	979	987	+ 0.82%
Nth Dub city	998	1,010	+ 1.20%
Dub city centre	987	1,005	+ 1.82%
Sth Dub city	1,113	1,130	+ 1.53%
Sth Dub Co	1,306	1,306	0.00%
West Dub Co	963	961	-0.21%
Galway city	755	756	+ 0.13%
Cork city	885	900	+ 1.69%
Limerick city	690	683	-1.01%
Waterford city	645	616	-4.50%

The Minister for Social Protection has asserted this year that 'there will be no incidence of homelessness due to these changes'.⁵ However, there is some anecdotal evidence that these changes have, on one hand, contributed to a number of individuals becoming homeless and, on the other hand, made it more difficult for people moving out of homelessness to secure appropriate accommodation in the private rented sector.

AIM OF THE RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

Focus Ireland commissioned this small-scale research to examine the impact of recent changes in Rent Supplement in Ireland on transitions into homelessness and exits from homelessness involving the private rented sector. The research seeks to establish whether changes in Rent Supplement have: (i) increased the risk of people living in private rented accommodation and dependent on social welfare becoming homeless; and (ii) impacted on the likelihood of success for people seeking to exit homelessness into the private rented sector.

The research also considers whether specific changes in Rent Supplement policy could result in it making a greater contribution to preventing and ending homelessness in Ireland.

The methodological approach for this study included the following elements:

1. An examination of the relationship between rent levels (established through Daft) and changes in the Rent Supplement thresholds over the last three years.

⁵ Topical Issue Debate - Rent Supplement Scheme, Thursday, 28 June 2012 (Minister John Perry, TD on behalf of Minister Joan Burton, TD), Dáil Éireann Debate , Vol. 770 No. 3

2. Telephone interviews of landlord and letting agent attitudes to Rent Supplement and people moving out of homelessness. (Front-line research was carried out by two of Focus Ireland's Housing Officers).
3. Structured, one-to-one qualitative interviews with a sample of 10 people (in different urban centres) who have been homeless and have cited rental issues as one of the causes of their homelessness.
4. Structured interviews with a range of key stakeholders, including Focus Ireland projects and Housing Officers, landlords' representative bodies, and other homeless and housing support organisations.

THE EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESS HOUSEHOLDS AND TENANTS

Ten households were interviewed in the Dublin and Galway city areas. Nine had experienced homelessness at some point (eight of these in 2012). Of the ten households interviewed, four were currently homeless and six were staying in private rented accommodation.

Of the six people staying in private rented accommodation, one had been served a notice to quit from her landlord at the time of interview (and lost her accommodation subsequent to the interview).

Payment of 'top-ups'

Of the eight interviewees who had current or prior experience of the private rented sector, five had unofficially paid a 'top-up' to their landlord⁶ while declaring a lower rental figure on their Rent Supplement form (the lower figure corresponding to the maximum rent figure for their area). Three people interviewed were currently paying a rent top-up to their landlord (i.e. half of those currently in private rented accommodation).

In the experience of those interviewed, there was no alternative but to pay a top-up. This was because of difficulties in securing private rented accommodation in the first instance, landlords' unwillingness to reduce the rent, and because of poor accommodation.

*I didn't want to ask him [the landlord] because he was a bit...reluctant to take the rent allowance and all the rest so I just kept my mouth closed and got the papers signed. **Tara***

*You know you have no choice – it's either that [pay a top-up] or go into a hell-hole and you can't live like that either. **Úna***

⁶ That is, a payment in addition to their minimum weekly contribution. The top-up is paid to meet the amount of rent which exceeds the rent limits set by the DoSP.

The most frequently arising top-up figure was €50 per month. All interviewees were dependent on social welfare payments. The impact of making these extra payments was indebtedness. Úna moved out of very poor quality accommodation, and her landlord refused to return her deposit. As a result, she had to raise a deposit for her current flat, in addition to paying a monthly top-up.

*I'm €600 in debt, I sold my dryer and I sold my coffee table and I borrowed the rest from my family. **Úna***

Two of the interviewees were under the age of 25 years, and both were paying a top-up, in spite of receiving the lower level of jobseekers allowance (€100 per week).

Renegotiating rent levels with landlords in line with rent limits

Only one couple interviewed successfully negotiated their rent level downwards in Dublin Fingal, but they were clear that if they had not been successful in doing so, they would themselves have met the difference in rent.

SWA Circular No. 21/11 provides for exceptional circumstances where the maximum rent limit can be exceeded, where there are special housing needs (including those who are homeless). Máire, a lone parent with two children, previously living in B&B accommodation, was the only one interviewee who received such an exemption. Her Rent Supplement application was refused because the accommodation she found exceeded the rent limit by €75 per month. It was only after intervention from an advocacy and support organisation that she was granted an exemption. However, she is still uncertain about her situation:

*They [HPU⁷] also said that they would review it in a few weeks time, so I'm sort of sitting in limbo thinking 'am I going to be turfed out in a few weeks time, will I have to go back to [B&B] accommodation?'. I don't know where I am at....They are saying that if they get word in the budget there are going to be more cuts they might even turf me out before the [end of the] year. **Máire***

Another couple, Peter and Sarah, have one child and are expecting their second child in two months. They were refused their application for Rent Supplement, as the accommodation they had sourced exceeded the rent limit established for one couple with one child. However, the accommodation fell within the limits established for a couple with two children. Again, following intervention by an advocacy and support organisation, their application was approved.

⁷ Homeless Persons' Unit

Centralised Rent Supplement application

One couple interviewed lived in an area covered by a Central Rent Unit, and had found the system very hard to engage with.

*Anytime you call them you have to wait on the phone like one hourthen [as a result of being on hold] €20 [phone credit] is gone...it is free-phone from a landline. We don't have a landline, if you have a mobile it's terrible and we were once waiting 45 minutes on the line.You need to talk to somebody to explain why, how. If you send letters, nobody answers. **Niall and Josephine***

Subsequent to this interview, the Minister for Social Protection has confirmed that the free-phone number for the Central Rent Unit in Dublin 15 has been replaced with a Lo-call number.⁸

Access to Private Rented Sector

Interviewees spoke of their difficulties in accessing private rented accommodation, and the widespread experience that most landlords are reluctant to accept Rent Supplement.

*If you find ten houses, you will find two that will accept rent allowance and eight that won't accept rent allowance...but even more now, because nearly all of them won't accept rent allowance. **Niall and Josephine***

Some reasoned that the payment of Rent Supplement in arrears was the reason:

*They do not want to wait three, four or six weeks, they always want the money straight away, as soon as they can get it. **Stefan***

The DoSP has confirmed that 52 exceptional needs payments were issued for the purpose of paying rent payments in advance (up to September 2012). The figure for 2011 was 52. This annual figure is almost one-third the number of exceptional needs payments for this purpose made in 2008.⁹

CHANGES IN RENT SUPPLEMENT – THE VIEWS OF LANDLORDS AND LETTING AGENTS

A survey was undertaken with 27 landlords and letting agents. 16 stated that they currently accepted people on Rent Supplement (59%), and the remainder either did not currently accept rent allowance (26%) or were undecided about whether they would accept it in the future (15%).

⁸ Minister Joan Burton T.D., Response to Parliamentary Question (no. 637), Tuesday 18 September 2012

⁹ Minister Joan Burton T.D., Response to Parliamentary Question (no. 638), Tuesday 18 September 2012

Of those who accepted Rent Supplement or were considering whether they would in the future, just under half require/would require an additional 'top-up' from the tenant to make up the difference between the rental asking price and the rent limit established by the Department of Social Protection.

The major themes arising in the surveys were that: rent limits not reflecting market rates; the unacceptability of receiving Rent Supplement in arrears; the importance of tenants receiving supports to maintain their tenancies; and the need for Rent Supplement payments to be made directly to the landlords from the DoSP.

The most common influencing factors that may determine future plans of landlords included:

- Rent limit increases (59% of all survey respondents)
- Guaranteed supports from support organisations for tenants to maintain tenancies (52%),
- DoSP paying Rent Supplement directly to landlords (48%)
- Availability of 'rent up front' and not in arrears (44%)

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the 10 household interviews and the views of service providers suggest that the intention of the DoSP's rent review 'to ensure that maximum rent limits are placed at appropriate price points to create further downward pressure on the market'¹⁰ may not have been achieved.

There are a number of possible reasons for this.

First, the findings of this research indicate that the maximum rent levels are not in fact consistent with the rent levels disclosed in applications for Rent Supplement. There is a willingness and expectation of tenants to pay a further contribution to their rent, in the form of a rent 'top-up'.

The prevalence of top-up payments highlighted in the interviews is consistent with the responses of landlords and support organisations consulted as part of this research. It also suggests that the impact of Rent Supplement changes may be hidden in the short-term. As it is the tenant in many cases who appears to be meeting the costs of Rent Supplement changes, indebtedness, arrears and ultimately loss of accommodation is likely to arise. The extent of indebtedness and arrears arising from this situation is probably underestimated in this research, given that many of those interviewed had either recently secured accommodation, or were still seeking it.

Second, the provisions under the changes to rent limits in 2012 provide that each individual tenant is required to renegotiate new rent levels with their landlord. The bargaining power of an individual tenant is weak for obvious reasons: the poor quality of

¹⁰ SWA Circular No. 21/11, *Rent Supplement – Maximum Rent Levels*.

accommodation, difficulties in accessing accommodation that accepts Rent Supplement, and the reduced supply for private rented sector accommodation. It is therefore unrealistic to expect tenants, with little or no leverage, to affect changes in the rental market by negotiating on an individual basis.

Finally, tenants may pay top-ups because they believe that they cannot find alternative accommodation within the rent limits. The DoSP appears confident that the lowered rent caps are appropriate to the market – tenants should therefore secure a lower rent in their current home, or find new and cheaper accommodation. But it is not clear what a tenant who cannot find cheaper accommodation is to do. Faced with this reality, tenants have little option but to pay a top-up.

Recommendations

1. Rent limits should be set in a more transparent manner, through an independent process, and should better reflect both actual market rents and urban and rural variations. The Department of Social Protection's primary aim is to meet the welfare needs of its clients, and any attempt to influence the level of market rents should be balanced against this objective.
2. There should be no further reductions in Rent Supplement rent limits pending this system being implemented.
3. An alternative to tenants negotiating for rent reductions directly with their landlords should be found. Tenants should not be required to break the terms of their lease and renegotiate a new rent limit, until the annual rent review in their tenancy agreement arises. Where it is clear that every effort to secure accommodation has been undertaken by the Rent Supplement recipient, a local review of appropriate accommodation available should be undertaken by the Community Welfare Service and the recipient should be provided Rent Supplement at a level that will secure private rented accommodation.
4. Rent Supplement payments should be paid directly to landlords by the Department of Social Protection by default. In order to maintain the integrity of the contract between the tenant and the landlord, it should only be paid by the tenant where they specifically request this option.
5. Consideration should be given for greater delineation of county areas for the purpose of setting rent limits, to better account for fluctuations in average rents in city and county areas. In areas where there are significant fluctuations, this could result in savings to the State.
6. Given reports of increase in rents since the start of 2012, the rent limits review to be undertaken by the Department of Social Protection should take place sooner than June 2013 (which is the date the next review is due to take place).
7. Until the Rent Supplement system switches to local authorities, there should be a re-introduction of the free-phone number for all callers to Central Rent Units. Case

officers should be allocated to specific geographic areas, to enable applicants to have a consistent point of contact to discuss their applications.

8. Data should be recorded on the time taken to approve Rent Supplement applications, whether in a local office or in a central rent unit in order to enable comparisons.
9. As is currently required, but not implemented, all cases where Community Welfare Officers use the discretion available to them to approve Rent Supplement applications at rents exceeding the rent limits should be recorded to contribute to the evidence base for effective policy. This data on the Rent Supplement Scheme should be published in a readily accessible format on a regular basis. Homeless organisations should record the number of households who have been allocated and refused an exemption to the rent limits.
10. New protocols should be devised in relation to the implementation of SWA Circular No. 21/11.¹¹ For people who are currently homeless for at least six months, local authorities should administer a new system of subsidising housing costs in the private rented sector. This should be designed to enable people who are currently homeless to access accommodation at a higher rent threshold than applies for Rent Supplement, and should incorporate a system to help people pay the initial deposit. This is line with the Government's current Housing Policy Statement, which endorses a 'Housing First' approach to homelessness, and would formalise the discretionary exceptions available under the Rent Supplement system.
11. Payments of rental deposits and rents in advance should be provided for under the Rent Supplement Scheme, where applicants have been assessed as in need of social housing.

¹¹ This circular provides for exceptional circumstances where the maximum rent limit can be exceeded, for example, where there are special housing needs (including those who are homeless).

1. Introduction

1.1 BACKGROUND TO STUDY

Focus Ireland is a housing and homeless charity working to prevent people becoming, remaining or returning to homelessness through the provision of quality services, supported housing, research and advocacy. The organisation provides a range of services that support people who are homeless to secure, settle into, and maintain suitable and affordable long-term housing.

With the decline in building of social housing in Ireland, the private rented sector is playing an increasing role in Irish housing tenure for many people on low incomes, and is increasingly seen as a key route out of homelessness.

People that reside in private rented accommodation and who cannot provide for the cost of their accommodation from their own resources may receive Rent Supplement from the Department of Social Protection (DoSP) to assist them in covering their rent payments.

There have been a number of changes to Rent Supplement rates in Ireland since 2009. The contribution to be made by the tenant has been increased and the maximum rent limits have been reduced on a number of occasions. The policy objective of the DoSP in reducing the maximum rents payable is to reduce public expenditure by reducing the level of rent charged by private landlords, in line with falling purchase prices in the housing market. The DoSP has argued that changes in this regard will not impact on the tenant, as the reduced rent subsidy is matched by a reduced rent.

The Minister for Social Protection has noted that 'there will be no incidence of homelessness due to these changes'.¹² However, there is anecdotal evidence that these changes have, on one hand, contributed to a number of individuals becoming homeless and, on the other hand, made it more difficult for people moving out of homelessness to secure appropriate accommodation in the private rented sector.

1.2 AIM OF THE RESEARCH

Focus Ireland commissioned this small-scale research to examine the impact of recent changes in Rent Supplement in Ireland on transitions into homelessness and exits from homelessness involving the private rented sector. The research seeks to establish whether changes in Rent Supplement have: (i) increased the risk of people living in private rented accommodation and dependent on social welfare becoming homeless; and (ii) impacted on the likelihood of success for people seeking to exit homelessness into the private rented sector.

¹² Topical Issue Debate - Rent Supplement Scheme, Thursday, 28 June 2012 (Minister John Perry, TD on behalf of Minister Joan Burton, TD), Dáil Éireann Debate, Vol. 770 No. 3

The research also considers whether specific changes in Rent Supplement policy could result in it making a greater contribution to preventing and ending homelessness in Ireland.

1.3 GENERAL RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach for this study included the following elements:

1. An examination of the relationship between rent levels (established through Daft) and changes in the Rent Supplement thresholds over the last three years.
2. Telephone interviews of landlord and letting agent attitudes to Rent Supplement and people moving out of homeless. (Front-line research was carried out by two of Focus Ireland's Housing Officers).
3. Structured, one-to-one qualitative interviews with a sample of 10 people (in different urban centres) who have been homeless and have cited rental issues as one of the causes of their homelessness.
4. Structured interviews with a range of key stakeholders, including Focus Ireland projects and Housing Officers, landlords' representative bodies, and other homeless and housing support organisations.

1.3.1 Ethical considerations

Ethical provisions were central throughout the research, and were based on the following principles:

- Provision of clear information about the research
- Assurance of confidentiality
- Preventing disclosure of identities
- Voluntary participation
- Attaining informed consent
- Avoiding undue intrusion
- Ensuring no harm arises to those researched
- Ability to withdraw from the research process at any time
- Protecting the interests of research subjects

1.4 FORMAT OF REPORT

This report describes the system of Rent Supplement and the findings of this research. Section 2 describes the Rent Supplement system, and outlines some of the recent changes in the system and private sector rental trends.

Section 3 describes the effects of recent changes in the Rent Supplement system from the perspective of households and individuals interviewed for this research. The interviewees were either homeless, at risk of homelessness, or had previously experienced homelessness, and had experience of seeking accommodation in the private rented sector.

Section 4 summarises the findings of the survey undertaken with landlords and letting agents, and the impacts of changes in the Rent Supplement system on their decisions to accept Rent Supplement payments.

Section 5 discusses the key themes arising from these findings, and is followed by a series of recommendations.

2. Rent Supplement and housing

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, the rented sector has become increasingly important as a source of housing in Ireland. Census data indicates that a total of 474,788 households were in rented accommodation in 2011, which is a rise of 47 percent from 2006. The proportion of households that were renting in 2011 was 29 percent, up from 22 percent in 2006. 69 percent of those in rented accommodation were in the private rented or voluntary housing sectors.

The proportion of those renting from the private rented sector (or the voluntary housing sector) increased by 63 percent (from 195,797 in 2006 to 320,319 in 2011) according to Census 2011 data.¹³

The composition of the private rented sector has been characterised as 'a fragmented, under-capitalised 'cottage' industry, lacking the professionalism and modern synergy with a strong regulatory framework that prevails in other EU countries'.¹⁴ One feature of this sector is the prevalence of buy-to-let mortgage holders, and in October 2012 the Central Bank noted that in addition to the 129,000 residential mortgages that are in arrears, 37,000 investment or buy-to-let mortgage holders, representing €11 billion worth of debt, are behind on their repayments. 90+ day arrears of buy-to-let properties were twice that of owner-occupier rates of arrears.

The reliance on the private sector as a source of housing will be a long-term policy, given the Housing Policy Statement's vision for the future of the housing sector, which is 'based on choice, fairness, equity across tenures and on delivering quality outcomes for the resources invested. The overalls strategic objective will be to enable all households access good quality housing appropriate to household circumstances and in their particular communities of choice.'¹⁵

2.2 RENT SUPPLEMENT

Rent Supplement is one of a number of payments that come within the Supplementary Allowance (SWA) scheme, which has been in operation since 1977. SWA was originally designed to meet urgent needs flexibly and promptly, while also guaranteeing a standard basic minimum income to all citizens. Supplements under the SWA scheme include expenses, such as rent or mortgage interest payments, heating and dietary needs for

¹³ CSO (2012): Census 2011 Profile 4 – The Roof Over Our Heads. Dublin: CSO

¹⁴ Taft, M. (2009) 'Investment is the key to rental sector renewal', Daft Rental Report Quarter 4, 2009

¹⁵ Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (2011) Housing Policy Statement.

those whose income would be insufficient to meet their basic needs (Comhairle, 2002)¹⁶. The Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme is funded and legislated for by the Department of Social Protection, and departmental staff members are responsible for assessing the income of a person applying for payments under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme.

2.3 THE FUNCTION AND OPERATION OF THE RENT SUPPLEMENT SCHEME

Rent Supplement is paid to people living in private rented accommodation who cannot provide for the cost of their accommodation from their own resources.¹⁷ The Department of Social Protection envisages Rent Supplement as providing short-term support to eligible people living in private rented accommodation 'whose means are insufficient to meet their accommodation costs and who do not have accommodation available to them from any other source.'¹⁸

2.3.1 Criteria for eligibility for Rent Supplement

A person is eligible for Rent Supplement if they have been living for 6 months (183 days) out of the last 12 months in one, or a combination, of the following:

- Accommodation for homeless people.
- Private rented accommodation. A person or family can combine time living in more than one rented accommodation to satisfy the 6 months (183 days). The applicant must be able to show that he/she could afford the rent at the beginning of their tenancy and that they could have continued to pay rent but are unable to do so because of a change in their circumstances which occurred after they started renting.
- An institution, for example, a hospital, care home or a place of detention.
- Have been assessed by a local authority as being eligible for, and in need of, social housing in the last 12 months.
- Applicants must pass a habitual residence test and a means test.¹⁹

2.3.2 Rent Supplement as a mechanism for social housing provision

State expenditure on Rent Supplement has significantly increased in recent times. Expenditure on the scheme was €7.8 million in 1989, and since 2005 the expenditure on Rent Supplement has increased from €369 million to approximately €503 million in

¹⁶ Comhairle (2002) 'Rent Supplement and the Private Rented Sector: Issues for Policy and Practice', Social Policy Series. Comhairle in association with Threshold

¹⁷ <http://www.welfare.ie/EN/Schemes/SupplementaryWelfareAllowance/Pages/RentSupplement.aspx>

¹⁸ Supplementary Welfare Allowance Unit (2011) *Rent Limits Review Report*

¹⁹ http://www.welfare.ie/EN/Schemes/SupplementaryWelfareAllowance/Pages/RentSupplement.aspx#Further_information6

2011. The number of persons claiming the allowance increased from almost 60,200 persons in 2005 to over 96,800 at the end of 2011 (a 61% increase).²⁰ For approximately the same period (between Census 2006 and 2011), the proportion of households renting from either the private or voluntary sector (as a whole) rose by 63.6 percent.

A report by the Comptroller and Auditor General²¹ showed that about one-third of the additional expenditure recorded between 2000 and 2005 was accounted for by increases in the number of recipients, while the remainder resulted from higher rents. According to the Department of Social Protection, the government has provided €436 million for Rent Supplement in 2012.²²

It is now widely recognised that the Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) Rent Supplement Scheme is essentially a social-housing mechanism, operating as a means through which low-income households can meet their accommodation needs within the private rented sector. The Comptroller and Auditor General's report (2006) also noted that despite the stated policy aim that the scheme is to provide households with short-term assistance to meet rental costs, about 70 percent of recipients at any point in time are likely to still be in receipt of Rent Supplement one year later, and around 55 percent are likely to remain on the scheme for at least two years.²³ This reflects the increased reliance on private rented sector as a means of social housing, which is a trend likely to be maintained in light of increased unemployment.

2.3.3 Rent Supplement rent limits

In order for a rental property to be considered eligible for Rent Supplement, it must not exceed a set maximum rent level for the local authority or county area in which the property is located. These rent limits (also commonly referred to as rent caps) vary according to type of accommodation, the nature of the household, and location of the property.

The Department of Social Protection (DoSP) use publicly quoted data on asking rental prices to determine the rent ceilings for each county. The DoSP also notes that it uses data from the PRTB. Maximum rent limits are established on a county basis and set limits for the Department's staff in their respective areas. The DoSP asserts that the purpose of setting maximum rent limits is to ensure that different categories of eligible tenant households can secure and retain suitable rented accommodation, having regard

²⁰ www.welfare.ie

²¹ Comptroller and Auditor General (2006) *Report on Value for Money Examination Department of Social and Family Affairs: Rent Supplements*

²² Minister Joan Burton T.D., Response to Parliamentary Question (no. 637), Tuesday 18 September 2012

²³ Comptroller and Auditor General (2006) *Rent Supplements (Value for Money Report 53)*, Dublin: Office of Comptroller and Auditor General.

to the different rental market conditions that prevail in various parts of the State, while ensuring value for money for the Exchequer.²⁴

2.4 RENT REVIEW REPORT 2011

The Rent Limits Review Report (2011) was undertaken by the Department of Social Protection in advance of changes to the Rent Supplement system. This report reviewed rents in the Republic and concluded that rental values had stabilised at or near the maximum rent limits in place nationally.²⁵

The report compared maximum rent limits (that were in place at the time) with average rental rates based on Daft data in November 2011. It found that the maximum rent limits were in excess of average asking rates for two-bed accommodation, with the exception of Dublin. It also asserted that when high-end socio-economic areas, and particular types of accommodation (penthouses, detached residences, etc.), were removed for the Dublin area, that there was scope for reductions in the maximum rent limits. The report concluded that the Department was in a position to secure savings in levels of expenditure on Rent Supplement.

The review utilises the 40th percentile as a basis of establishing rent limits, which it says will ensure that properties at the lower end of the market (approximately 40% of the suitable housing stock) will be available to Rent Supplement tenants.²⁶ The Rent Limits Review Report notes that the Department of Social Protection currently funds approximately 40 percent of the private sector rented accommodation.

The Rent Limits Review Report formed the basis for the maximum rent limits set from 1st January 2012 (discussed in section 2.5.2 below). It estimated that the Exchequer would save €22 million from these changes in rent limits, and projected total savings to the Exchequer of €55 million from an increase in the minimum contribution and a review of the rent limits.²⁷

Some observations on the report include the fact that the analysis (particularly for outside of Dublin) is undertaken on a geographic county basis, which is problematic given that Daft data indicates a significant variation in rent levels between county and city areas. Therefore rent limits based on the 40th percentile in a county area are likely to fall short of the same percentile in a city within that (geographic) county area.

For example, the comparisons between average rents (all properties) in city and county areas as reported by Daft in 2012 (Quarter 2) are illustrated below.

²⁴ Department of Social Protection (2011) Rent Limits Review Report 2011. Completed by: Supplementary Welfare Allowance Unit (p.10)

²⁵ Department of Social Protection (2011) Rent Limits Review Report 2011. Completed by: Supplementary Welfare Allowance Unit

²⁶ Sources of data include PRTB datasets and Daft.ie data.

²⁷ Summary of Budget Estimates and Reviews 2012 www.budget.gov.ie

Table 2.1 Average rents (€), Daft data 2012 (Qtr 2)

	County	City	% diff.
Galway	547	756	38.2%
Cork	665	900	35.3%
Limerick	619	683	10.3%
Waterford	609	616	1.1%

The significant variation in rent levels in the above cities and their respective county areas points to a need for a city weighting in the categories, in order to avoid rent levels which are too high for a county area, or rent limits based on a county/city average which will be too low for the city. One example of this is the Bray area, which has its own separate rent limits, thus acknowledging significant variation in the market rates for rent in Wicklow. Similarly in Dublin, rent limits are delineated, but only for the Fingal County area.

The DoSP has argued that Rent Supplement has set the market price. According to Minister Burton, the issue of rents stabilising since 2009, 'does pose the question as to whether an element of this relates to the pricing floors available to landlords in the form of Rent Supplement limits. It is essential that rents are allowed to stabilise from a natural balance of supply and demand, rather than as a result of a price floor funded by the taxpayer.'²⁸ However, the assumption that Rent Supplement sets the market price for the private rental sector is flawed. It can be argued that other factors mentioned above (i.e. increased demand for private rented sector accommodation; reduced supply; historic house prices and consequently the mortgages (and arrears) on the buy-to-let sector) all have a significant role in creating an effective floor in rental asking prices.

2.5 RECENT CHANGES TO RENT SUPPLEMENT

The following changes have been made to the Rent Supplement Scheme in the last number of years.

2.5.1 *Tenant contribution*

Since 2009, the minimum tenant contribution towards rent has been revised upwards by 130% for a single person. In January 2009, it increased from €13 per week for a single household to €18. Between 2009 and 2010, the minimum tenant contribution increased from €18 to €24. It was subsequently announced in Budget 2012 that the minimum contribution towards rent would again increase: since 1st January 2012 the minimum contribution for single tenants is €30 per week (an increase of €6 per week). The minimum tenant contribution for single households remains €30 per week for those

²⁸ Source: The Daft.ie Rental Report, An analysis of recent trends in the Irish rental market, 2011 in review (p.4)

under 25 years of age who receive a reduced rate for Jobseekers Allowance. Couples with one income contribute a minimum weekly payment of €35.²⁹

2.5.2 Rent limits

Maximum rent thresholds were first reduced in the 2009 Supplementary Budget, when thresholds were revised downwards by between 6-10 percent, and payments to existing recipients were reduced by 8 percent.

In Budget 2010, thresholds were further reduced on average by 11 percent.

Statutory Instrument No. 729 of 2011 provides for the most recent changes in Rent Supplement by the DoSP. These changes provide for a downward adjustment in the rent limits established for each county area in Ireland. These new rent limit levels are operational for the period January 2012 to June 2013, and according to the DoSP, the changes constitute an approximate reduction of 13 percent on previous rent limits. However for single households, the most recent reduction averages between 15-16 percent for single households, the most prevalent homeless household type.

The new limits apply to new tenancies (from January 2012) and to existing claimants when their claims are reviewed or if they move to new accommodation (see the appendices for a table of the limits).

The DoSP states that if, when a tenant's claim for Rent Supplement is reviewed, the rent paid is above the rent limit (for the geographic area and type of accommodation) and the tenant's lease is not due for renewal, they are expected to re-negotiate the rent with their landlord. If the landlord insists that the terms of the current lease are not negotiable and does not reduce the rent to the new limits, a DoSP representative will 'discuss options' with the tenant. Notice of this is communicated to the tenant by letter. These options may include seeking other accommodation. If this occurs the tenant will continue to be paid Rent Supplement for a 'reasonable period of time' (i.e. up to 13 weeks) while they secure new accommodation.

2.5.3 Exceptional circumstances

SWA Circular No. 21/11 provides for exceptional circumstances where the maximum rent limit can be exceeded, for example, where there are special housing needs (including those who are homeless).

It also notes that 'Assistant Principal Officers with responsibility for administering SWA must inform the SWA section of all cases where exceptions to the maximum rent levels are made. Officers are reminded of the importance of making such notifications as this facilitates the effective monitoring and management of the Rent Supplement system.'³⁰

²⁹ Rent Supplement is a means-tested payment.

³⁰ SWA Circular No. 21/11, Rent Supplement – Maximum Rent Levels. 22 December 2011

2.5.4 Application process

Since 2009, there has been a shift towards the Rent Supplement assessment being conducted by a Deciding Officer in a Department of Social Protection centralised office. At present, Central Rental Units cover areas of Dublin 15, Dublin 24, parts of Dublin city, Cavan, Monaghan, Wicklow, Waterford and Kildare.

2.5.5 Summary of changes in Rent Supplement (2009-2012)

Key changes in the Rent Supplement system 2009-2012	
Maximum rent threshold	Reduced by 6-10%, and payments to existing recipients reduced by 8% - effective in June 2009 Reduced on average by 11% - effective in June 2010 Reduced on average by 13%, and reduced by 15-16% for single person households - effective in January 2012 ³¹
Minimum ³² tenant contribution (single household)	Increased from €13 to €18 - effective in January 2009 Increased from €18 to €24 - effective in May 2009 Increased from €24 to €30 - effective in 2012 ³³
Application process	Central Rent Units have been established to process applications in some areas
Eligibility	Entitlement restrictions to those who are existing tenants for at least 6 months, or who are on the local authority housing list following a full assessment - effective in May 2009

2.6 TRENDS IN THE RENTAL MARKET

The Daft rental report provides a quarterly analysis of rental trends in Ireland, on a county by county basis.

The statistics are based on properties advertised on Daft.ie for a given period. The average monthly sample size for rental properties varies from period to period, but approximates at a minimum of 10,000 properties.

The table below outlines the average advertised rents (in euro) for all rental properties included in the Daft analysis for cities in Ireland. This data is also presented graphically below in Figure 1.

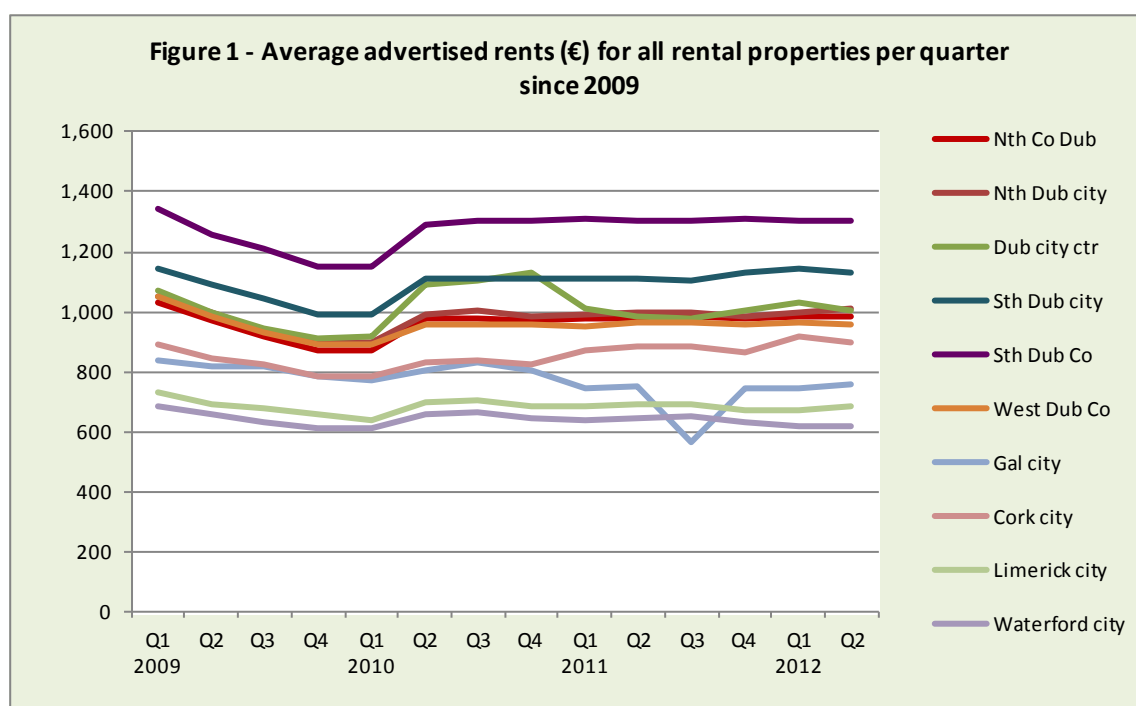
³¹ According to the DoSP (Rent Limits Review Report, 2011).

³² Rent Supplement is a means-tested payment

³³ Couples with one income currently contribute a minimum weekly payment of €35.

Table 2.2 Average advertised rents (€) for all rental properties per quarter since 2009

	Q1 2009	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1 2010	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1 2011	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1 2012	Q2
Nth Co Dub	1,034	969	920	873	869	979	979	970	980	979	984	980	982	987
Nth Dub city	1,053	996	941	899	899	993	1,002	985	992	998	996	982	995	1,010
Dub city centre	1,070	998	945	909	921	1,094	1,104	1,134	1,010	987	975	1,005	1,032	1,005
Sth Dub city	1,143	1,090	1,042	994	991	1,108	1,114	1,113	1,111	1,113	1,105	1,128	1,143	1,130
Sth Dub Co	1,341	1,260	1,209	1,153	1,153	1,289	1,303	1,303	1,309	1,306	1,302	1,309	1,306	1,306
West Dub Co	1,049	985	930	891	893	961	960	955	953	963	964	955	966	961
Galway city	838	818	821	782	773	808	834	804	746	755	568	747	744	756
Cork city	890	847	827	785	785	833	836	824	869	885	883	865	917	900
Limerick city	733	694	677	658	638	697	703	688	686	690	692	673	675	683
Waterford city	687	659	634	613	610	656	663	645	639	645	653	632	617	616



With respect to overall rents, the data illustrates that rents have largely recovered since falling between 2009 and early 2010. In the Dublin area as a whole, most areas follow the same pattern, with relatively steady increases following a period of significant drop in 2009. Dublin city centre has experienced more fluctuations than other areas, particularly in early 2011. As regards current levels and recent changes, most areas would appear to have experienced an increase in rent levels towards the latter part of 2011/early 2012. The appendices to this report include graphs which indicate the rental changes in each of these geographic areas for each quarter since 2009.

2.6.1 *Specific sectoral activity*

The above Daft data provides information on average rents in the private rented sector as a whole, not taking into account different types of accommodation. A more detailed analysis of the Daft data provides a snapshot of rental rates in cities and in postal areas of Dublin (and other cities) for different types of accommodation.

A number of observations can be made on the basis of the latest Daft report (Quarter 2, 2012). These are summarised as follows:

- **There is a significant rural/urban divide in the rental sector:** in the second quarter of 2012, rents in Dublin, Galway city and Cork city were 2 percent higher than the same period in the previous year. At the same time, rents outside of the main cities continued to fall, and were 4 percent lower than they had been the same period in 2011.
- **The supply of rental accommodation continues to fall:** Daft note that the number of properties to rent in the second quarter of 2012 was 12 percent lower than in 2011. It also makes the point that this is the third year where a reduced supply of rental accommodation has occurred.

2.7 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DAFT RENTAL DATA AND RENT LIMITS

Following the rent review of 2010, the Department of Social Protection asserts that it reduced rent limits by 4 percent, and following its most recent rent review (2011), further reduced rent limits by an average of 13 percent. In this section, a brief comparison is made between these limits and Daft rental data for the same period.

It is important to note that there are a number of difficulties in making such a comparison – not least the fact that there are many sub-markets and variations within the rental market which will not be fully reflected in the Daft figures. Notwithstanding these differences, some headline analysis can be completed.

The graphs below illustrate the relationships between average rents for different accommodation types and the corresponding SWA rent limit.

For purposes of illustration, the range of average rents in Dublin is illustrated by indicating the area with the highest average rental figure (consistently Dublin 4), the area with the lowest average rental figure³⁴, and the area with the highest number of Rent Supplement claimants (Dublin 15).

The Daft data on rental asking prices does not delineate between one-bed accommodation that is self-contained or that is in shared (i.e., multi-bedroomed) accommodation. For the purposes of this analysis, the one-bed average rental price is

³⁴ Daft provides the lowest average rent per postal area, but this does not imply the lowest actual rent figure, which is likely to vary within each postal area.

benchmarked against the single person's SWA maximum rate (not sharing), and the two-bed accommodation is benchmarked against couple/One Parent Family (OPF) plus one child category in the rent limit chart. The three-bed accommodation category is benchmarked against the couple/OPF plus two children category.

It is also important to note that the SWA rent limits for cities such as Galway, Limerick, Cork and Waterford is a single county rate that includes the city and county areas.

2012 rental comparisons

Figure 2 below compares the average rents for one-bed accommodation and rent limits in 2012, and indicates a significant variation in the levels, even in areas with the lowest average rent in Dublin for that period (which was Dublin 7). Significant disparity exists between the two rent levels for all areas (in excess of €100) with the exception of Limerick city and Waterford city.

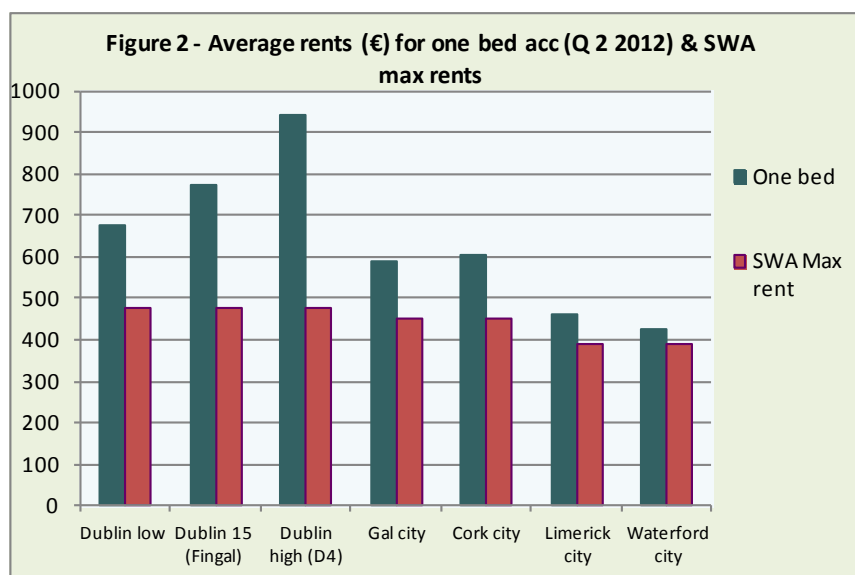
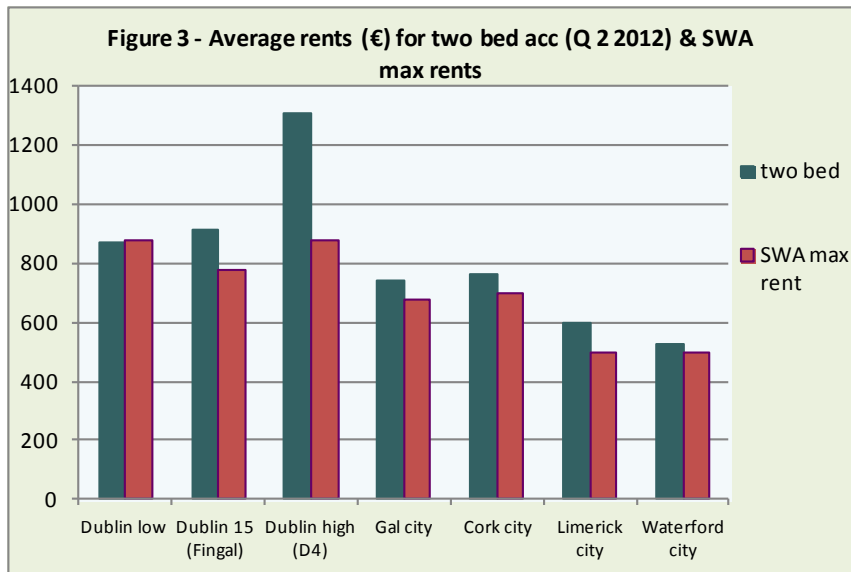
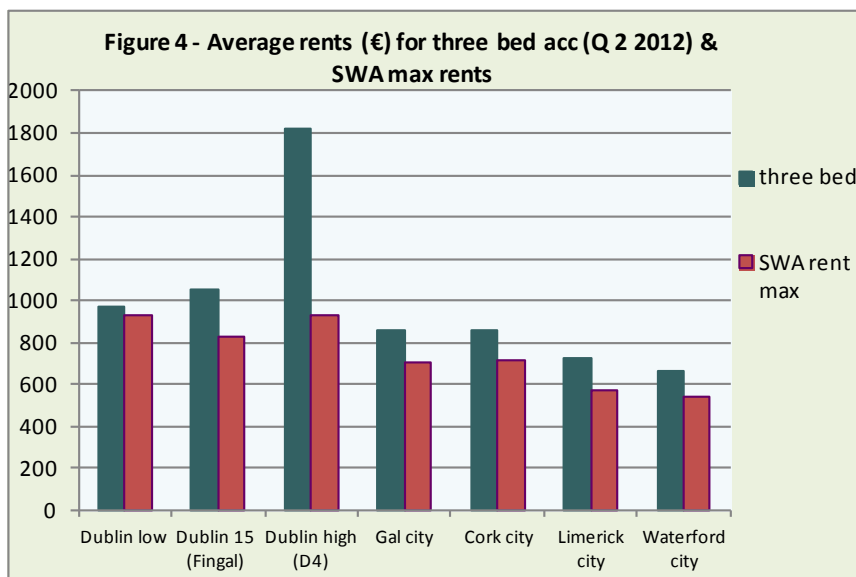


Figure 3 illustrates the average rents for two-bed accommodation and the corresponding SWA rent limits (i.e. rates for couple/OPF plus one child). The rent limits set are lower than all average rents with the exception of the average rent reported in Dublin 17 (which is the area with the lowest average rent). In the Dublin 15 area, the area which houses the highest proportion of Rent Supplement recipients, the average two-bed accommodation is higher than the rent limit – the differential being 15% of the average rental asking price.



While the argument could be made that as these present averages, and therefore include high end rents in their calculation, two points are worth noting: in the first instance and as mentioned above, the rent limits in cities such as Galway and Cork are whole county limits, and the cities in these county areas have a significantly higher rental rate than the county areas in which they are based. Second, the Daft figures note that rents have increased in 2012 since rent limits were set. Table 2.3 below (in section 2.7.1) compares Quarter 2 rents in 2012 with Quarter 2 rents in 2011.

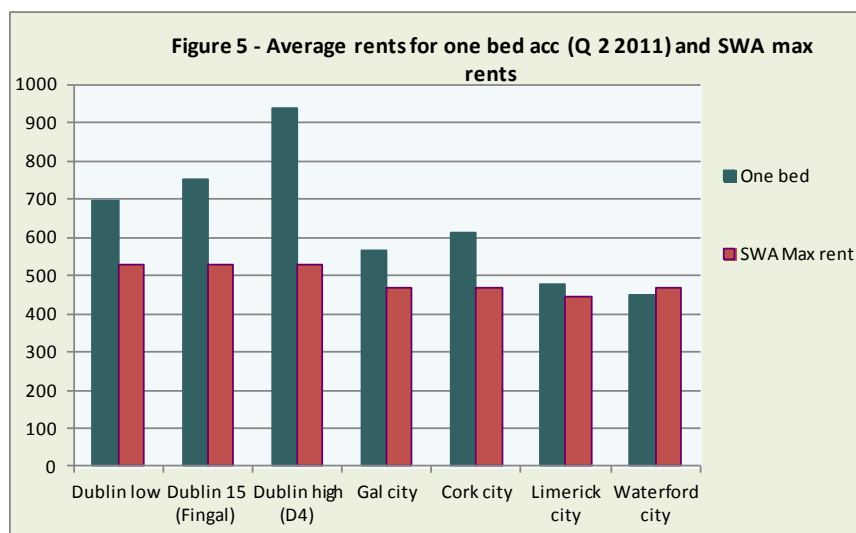
Figure 4 compares the average rents for three-bed accommodation and the SWA rent limit (i.e. limit for couple/OPF plus two children). Average rents in all areas exceed the rent limits set, although the area with the lowest average rent in this category in Dublin (Dublin 22) is close to the SWA rent limit.



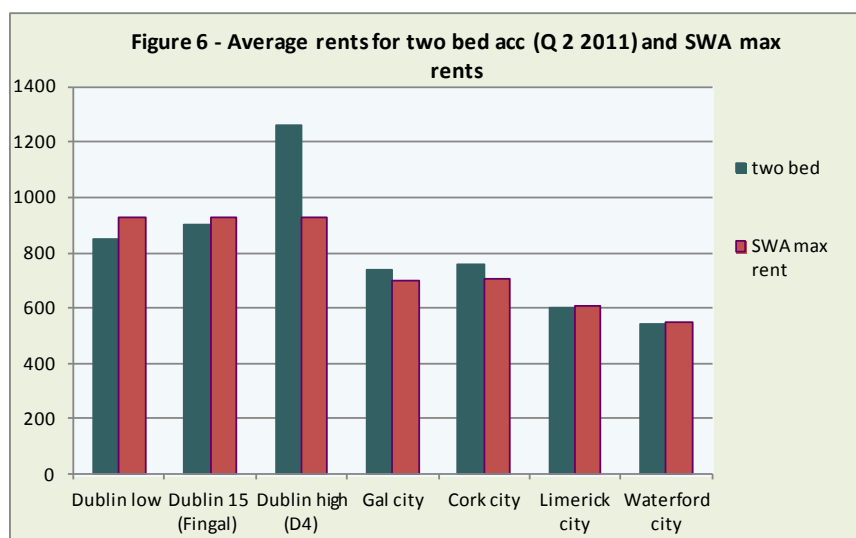
2011 rental comparisons

The same analysis is undertaken for 2011. The graphs for all three types of accommodation are provided below, which compare a snapshot average rental asking price figure for Quarter 2 in 2011 with the rent limits for that period.

The graph outlined below in Figure 5 (for one-bed accommodation) shows that the rent limits are higher than the average rents in Waterford city. While there is a lower rent limit than average rental asking price in all other areas, the disparity is not as great as in 2012 (this holds for all areas).

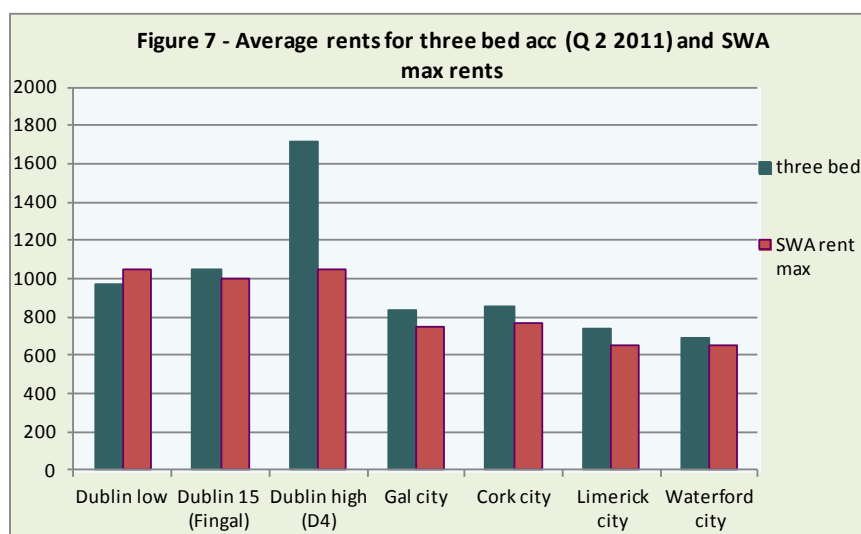


For two-bed accommodation, the rent limits exceed average rates in Dublin (for the area with the lowest average rent, which is Dublin 17 as well as Dublin 15), Waterford city and Limerick city. There is a small disparity between asking prices in Galway city and Cork city, but again these are much lower than compared to 2012.



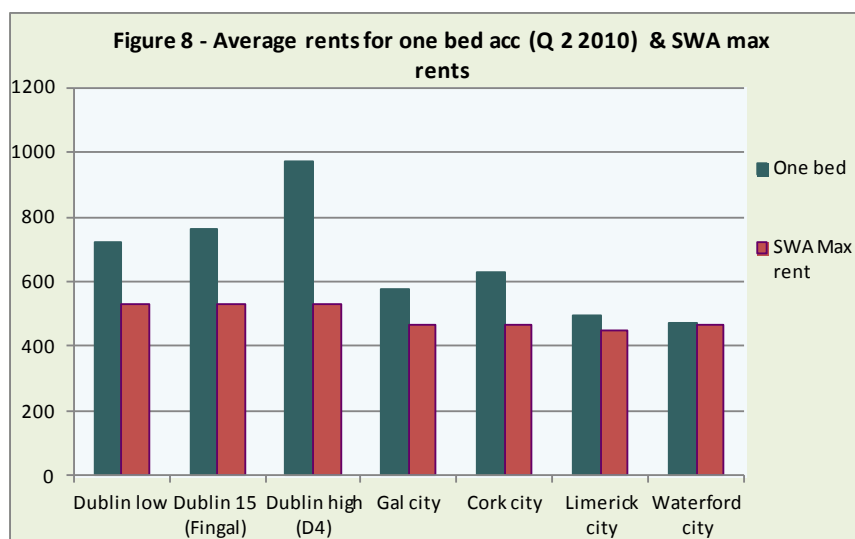
With regard to three-bed accommodation, there is one area where the rent limit equals or is greater than the average rent (i.e. Dublin 10, the area with the lowest average asking price for that period). In all other areas, the average rent is higher than rent

limits, but again the disparity between the two is not as great as in 2012. This is illustrated in Figure 7 below.



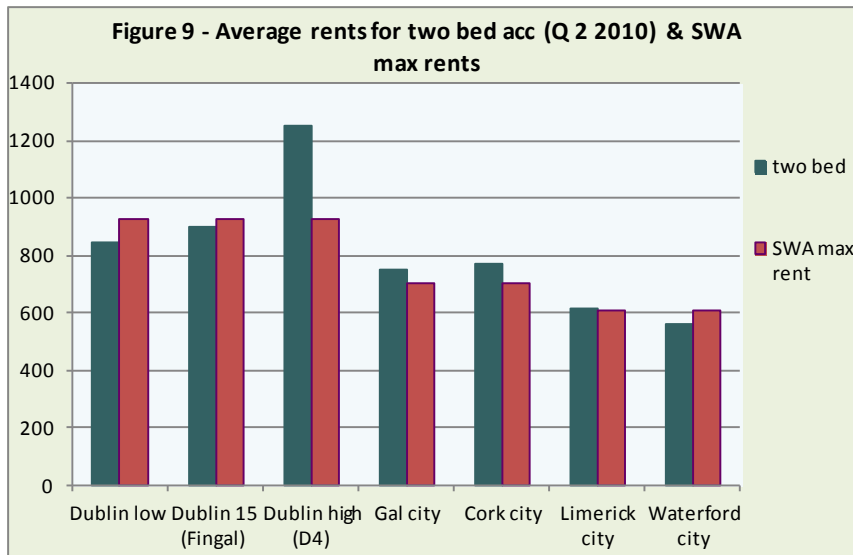
2010 rental comparisons

2010 comparisons for one-bed accommodation are illustrated in Figure 8, and indicate significant disparity between rent limits and average rents in all areas, with the exception of Waterford city. In Dublin 15, the disparity accounts for 30 percent of the average rental asking price. In all areas, the disparity accounts for over 10 percent of the rental asking price. However, the difference is not as great as the 2012 figures.

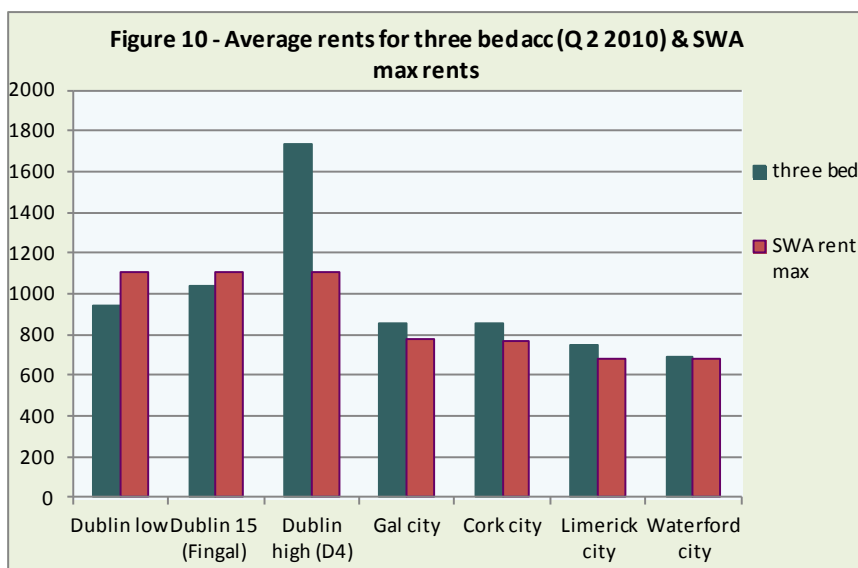


With regard to two-bed accommodation (Figure 9), the figures are quite different, with Waterford, Dublin 15, Dublin 17 and Dublin 22³⁵ all recording an average rental asking price which is lower than the rent limits for those areas. In Limerick city the disparity between the two rates is less than one percent of the average rental asking price.

³⁵ These are the two areas which record the lowest average rents in this category of accommodation.



For three-bed accommodation in this period, the areas where rent limits were significantly lower than average rents were Dublin 4, Cork city, Galway city and Limerick city. In both Dublin 10 (the area with the lowest average) and Dublin 15, rent limits were set higher than the average rent levels in these areas.



The above data demonstrates that Rent Supplement and maximum rent limits set by the DoSP do not appear to be keeping pace with the rental market across the three accommodation types, particularly in 2012 (when rental asking prices increased in most urban areas). There is also significant geographic disparity between rent limits and average rental asking prices in certain geographic areas. This could potentially have the effect of confining Rent Supplement recipients to particular geographic areas.

2.7.1 Average increase in rents in key urban areas

Since the 2012 rent limits were announced and calculated,³⁶ average rents have increased in most urban areas.

The table below provides a comparison between average rents in key urban areas in Quarter 2 2011 and Quarter 2 2012, to provide a year-on-year comparison.³⁷ This records a year-on-year increase in the majority of the geographic areas.

Table 2.3 Comparison between average rent rates (€) across major urban areas

	Q2 2011	Q2 2012	% change
Nth Co Dub	979	987	0.82%
Nth Dub city	998	1,010	1.20%
Dub city centre	987	1,005	1.82%
Sth Dub city	1,113	1,130	1.53%
Sth Dub Co	1,306	1,306	0.00%
West Dub Co	963	961	-0.21%
Galway city	755	756	0.13%
Cork city	885	900	1.69%
Limerick city	690	683	-1.01%
Waterford city	645	616	-4.50%

2.8 CRITIQUE OF THE RENT SUPPLEMENT SYSTEM

Organisations working with and advocating on behalf of those experiencing homelessness have lobbied for changes in the design and delivery of Rent Supplement.

One of the issues raised has been value for money in the Rent Supplement system, particularly for homeless households. Focus Ireland has contended that the cost of providing emergency homeless accommodation can be up to €30,000 per annum, which is twice the cost of providing supported accommodation in the private rented sector for those moving out of homelessness. It has recommended that in order to enable single households to move out of homelessness, the maximum (self-contained) rent thresholds for single people moving out of long-term homelessness should be increased to that for a couple.³⁸

In its most recent Pre-Budget Submission, Focus Ireland has recommended that the guidelines should be amended so that where applicants can prove that there is no

³⁶ The calculation and announcement took place in late 2011.

³⁷ While figures from Quarter 3 in 2011 comprised one dataset used in the Department's Rent Limits Review Report, this quarter has not been used as a basis for comparison in the table above in case of seasonal factors which could have a bearing on the comparison.

³⁸ Focus Ireland (2011) Pre-Budget Submission - 2012

accommodation available within the rent limits, Rent Supplement must be paid at the lowest rate available.³⁹

Threshold's Cork office carried out a survey in July 2012 to determine how many properties advertised fell within the new Rent Supplement limits. During the week of 16–20 July, there were just under 750 properties for rent in Cork. 73 properties in total were within the Rent Supplement limits and for which Rent Supplement was stated as being accepted (less than 10% of all properties available). While Threshold states that some landlords may in the end offer rents that fall below Rent Supplement limits, the survey indicates the difficulties in securing Rent Supplement properties.⁴⁰

Table 2.4 Rent limit number of properties in Cork (July 2012)

Type of property and rent limit	No. of properties available
Single (€450)	13
Couple (€575)	18
Couple/single one child (€700)	31
Couple/single 2 children (€715)	4
Couple /single 3 children (€750)	7

Source: Threshold Pre-Budget Submission 2013

A recent evaluation of 55 clients' experiences in accessing the Centralised Rent Unit⁴¹ has found that:

- 76 percent of survey respondents reported difficulties in making contact with the Centralised Rent Unit, and reported this as the primary issue experienced by clients;
- 94 percent of clients reported that when calling the number, it was not answered on every occasion;
- 87 percent could not leave a message and 100 percent did not get a call back (when the phone was not answered);
- 52 percent stated that they were waiting for over three months for a decision on their application;
- 86 percent stated that the Central Rent Unit was not an adequate service.

Threshold has also recommended the following reforms of Rent Supplement in its Pre-Budget Submission 2013:

- No further changes to Rent Supplement limits and minimum contribution.

³⁹ Focus Ireland (2012) Budget 2013 – A Tipping Point Between Home and Homelessness. 2013 Pre-Budget Submission

⁴⁰ Threshold Pre-Budget Submission 2013 to Department of Social Protection (September 2012)

⁴¹ Forthcoming research commissioned by the Citizens Information Centres in Blanchardstown, Northside, Kildare and Wicklow

- Review of the impact of Rent Supplement limits on single adult households (including one parent families and parents with part-time access to children) and certain geographical areas, leading to a reversal of previous changes where necessary.
- Immediate transfer of the Rent Supplement Scheme to local authorities to ensure that it operates as a housing support.

Focus Ireland has also recommended that sufficient resources are provided to allow face-to-face staffing in Central Rent Units so that the human, discretionary function of Community Welfare Officers is available to the most vulnerable people who need additional support with their application.⁴²

Finally, the Society of the Saint Vincent de Paul has called for the payment of Rent Supplement directly to registered and compliant landlords.⁴³

⁴² Focus Ireland (2011) Op Cit.

⁴³ Society of Saint Vincent De Paul (2011) Don't Cut Their Lifeline: poverty hurts us all, Society of St Vincent de Paul Pre-Budget Submission 2012

3. Impacts of changes to Rent Supplement – the experience of tenants

A number of qualitative interviews were undertaken to capture the experiences of Rent Supplement by those who were either currently homeless, currently at risk of homelessness, or had – at some point – experienced homelessness. Ten people were interviewed. Some were homeless at the time of interview, and access to private rented sector accommodation was their route out of homelessness. Others had secured accommodation relatively recently, with varying levels of security. One woman had been issued with a notice to quit, and subsequent to the interview, had left her accommodation and was staying with family members with little prospect of finding additional accommodation.

As the experiences and situation of those interviewed are varied, and the sample size is small, the analysis of their circumstances is not representative. However, their experiences do give an insight into how the Rent Supplement system is currently working for some.

3.1 PROFILE OF THOSE INTERVIEWED

3.1.1 *Housing status*

Of the ten people interviewed, nine had some experience of homelessness, and one had been served with a notice to quit by her landlord at the time of interview (and subsequently lost her accommodation). Of the nine people who had prior experience of homelessness, eight had experienced homelessness at some point in 2012, and had been trying to source accommodation since the changes in Rent Supplement were introduced in 2012.

Four people interviewed were currently homeless and six were staying in private rented accommodation.

3.1.2 *Location*

Four of the ten people interviewed were living in Galway. All the remaining interviewees were from various local authorities in Dublin.

Table 3.1 Location of interviewees	
County	Numbers interviewed
Galway city	4
Dublin (Fingal)	2
Dublin (South Dublin)	1
Dublin (city)	3
Total	10

3.1.3 Household status

Of the ten interviewed, seven had children. Two interviewees had children currently in care, and one interviewee's children were grown up (therefore four households had children living with them at the time of interview). Three interviewees were single people and had no children.

3.2 2012 CHANGES IN RENT LIMIT LEVELS AND TENANT CONTRIBUTION

Of those interviewed, three were in private sector accommodation when the most recent changes to the rent limits were introduced. Two had recalled receiving a rent review letter outlining the new maximum rent levels, and both were living in accommodation which exceeded the maximum rent levels.

Úna was living alone in single person's accommodation at the time of the changes in Rent Supplement. She received her rent review letter, outlining the new rent limits, and when she approached her landlord to renegotiate the rent he declined to lower the rent. She offered a top-up payment to meet the difference, which he also declined as he did not wish to declare on the Rent Supplement form a false rental figure. She had no option but to move out of her accommodation. She experienced difficulties in securing accommodation, and believes that this was due to a limited supply for Rent Supplement applicants, as well as rent limit rates. When she eventually did secure accommodation, this was of extremely poor quality, and she subsequently moved out after a number of months because of insect infestation, dampness, rotting floorboards, and mould. At the time of interview, she was pursuing the landlord for non-return of her deposit with the Private Residential Tenancies Board (PRTB).

In spite of the poor quality of her new accommodation, its rent levels also exceeded the rent limits, and she had to pay a top up of €50 per month. While Úna has since secured alternative and higher quality accommodation, the legacy of her experience has been indebtedness and the loss of her rent deposit. She is currently in new accommodation which is satisfactory, but she continues to pay a monthly top up of €50 per month from her disability allowance, on top of the minimum contribution of €30 per week.

3.2.1 *Payment of 'top-ups'*

Where the price of rental accommodation exceeds the rent limit established by the DoSP, the payment of a 'top-up' is a practice whereby the tenant pays the difference between the two amounts. The 'top-up' will be in addition to the tenant contribution towards the rent figure.

Where a top up of this nature is paid, the application for Rent Supplement declares a lower rent than that actually being charged by the landlord. As a result, the top-up payment will be undeclared, as the rental price (in exceeding the rent limit established by the DoSP) would be ineligible for Rent Supplement.

Most of the people interviewed were not living in the private rented sector at the time of the changes in maximum rent levels, but were seeking accommodation shortly after their introduction in 2012. Rent Supplement changes affected individuals differently – probably the most prevalent response to rent levels exceeding the new rent limits was the payment of a top-up, as illustrated in Úna's experience above.

Of the households who are or were living in the private rented sector, five had unofficially paid a 'top-up' to their landlord while declaring a lower rental figure on their Rent Supplement form (the lower figure corresponding to the maximum rent figure for their area). Of these households, three people interviewed were currently paying a rent top-up to their landlord (i.e. half of those in private rented accommodation).

This top-up on the rent payment was not only commonplace, but was an accepted norm for those living in private rented accommodation, even before the new rent levels were introduced.

*Yeah, it was over the rent cap, it was €50 over the rent cap but I had to basically, there's no other ones at €450....so I went there and he [the landlord] signed the forms and everything. **Tara***

When asked about renegotiating the rent in line with the new rent limit, Tara did not want to raise this issue with her landlord, because of the difficulty in getting the accommodation in the first instance:

*I didn't want to ask him [the landlord] because he was a bit...reluctant to take the rent allowance and all the rest so I just kept my mouth closed and got the papers signed. **Tara***

The accommodation that she has recently secured is €280 per month (shared accommodation), which is €50 above the rent limit. She is in the process of applying for Rent Supplement, but accepts that she will have to pay the €50 as a monthly top-up. Moreover, because of her age, Tara is accessing the reduced rate of jobseekers allowance (€100 per week).

After having lived in poor quality accommodation in Dublin city, Imogen secured accommodation which cost over €200 per month over the rent limit (this was prior to the new rent limits). However, she was willing to pay this excess as the accommodation was

of good quality. She rented out one of the spare rooms for a short period of time, and undertook some childminding work for friends. However, after falling ill she soon fell into arrears with her rent.

*I did take on too much...I was trying to cover a big gap in the rent out of my own pocket...then I lost the lodger, I lost the work, I was so penniless. **Imogen***

Úna was also willing to pay the top-up on her rent, because the alternative would be poor quality accommodation, similar to the one that she had lived in previously, and in her experience she was paying a top-up in the poor accommodation as well.

*You know you have no choice – it's either that [pay a top-up] or go into a hell-hole and you can't live like that either. **Úna***

In Úna's case, she noted that her Community Welfare Officer (CWO) knew that she was paying a top-up:

*She does know, but sure what can she do. **Úna***

Top-ups that were being paid by the interviewees at the time of interview were approximately €50 per month. The lowest amount being paid per month was €20. Those who had previously paid top-ups (and were currently homeless) had paid between €80 and €200 per month.

The prevalence of top-ups was reflected in discussions about the minimum tenant contribution towards the rent (€30 for single people and €35 for couples). Most people interviewed did not comment on this minimum contribution, principally because the actual contribution in the form of top-ups was greater.

The prevalence of a top-up payment in the interviews reflects the experience of support organisations. Cope in Galway undertook a survey of 70 clients who were moving out of homelessness. Of the 25 who secured private rented accommodation, 4 out of 10 were paying 'top-ups' to augment the rent limit.

Due to their lack of confidence in approaching the landlord (as they did not feel in a strong negotiating position), homeless or formerly homeless people would not seek a rent reduction. Instead they would approach the landlord to see if he/she would proceed with a top-up payment, which would be paid from the tenant's own resources.

Only one couple interviewed successfully negotiated their rent level downwards in Dublin Fingal, but this couple were clear that if they had not been successful in doing so, they would themselves have met the difference in rent.

3.2.2 *Exceptional circumstances*

SWA Circular No. 21/11 provides for exceptional circumstances where the maximum rent limit can be exceeded, for example, where there are special housing needs (including those who are homeless).⁴⁴

It also notes that 'Assistant Principal Officers with responsibility for administering SWA must inform the SWA section of all cases where exceptions to the maximum rent levels are made. Officers are reminded of the importance of making such notifications as this facilitates the effective monitoring and management of the Rent Supplement system.'⁴⁵

Of the six households currently staying in private rented accommodation, one interviewee had received an exemption allowing for the rent limit as established for her local authority area to be exceeded (as is permissible in exceptional circumstances).

Maire, a lone parent of two young children, first became homeless in 2012, and stayed with her children in emergency B&B accommodation in Dublin's city centre for approximately three months. Her children were attending school nine miles outside of the city centre. After securing accommodation in the area in which her children attended school, she was refused her application for Rent Supplement as the rent level exceeded the rent limit for the area (by €75 per month).

The rent limit was exceeded on the basis of an intervention with Castle Street⁴⁶ by a homeless support organisation, but Maire is still unsure of what this means for her future accommodation stability.

*They [HPU] also said that they would review it in a few weeks time, so I'm sort of sitting in limbo thinking 'am I going to be turfed out in a few weeks time, will I have to go back to [B&B] accommodation?'. I don't know where I am at....They are saying that if they get word in the budget there are going to be more cuts they might even turf me out before the [end of the] year. **Maire***

One couple interviewed, Peter and Sarah, were seeking family accommodation in Dublin Fingal. They are a couple with one child, but are expecting a second child in two month's time. The accommodation they secured was €820 per month, and even though this would come within the rent limit for a couple with two children (for which they would be eligible in a period of two months), they were refused. They were approved accommodation within the rent limit for a couple and one child (€775 per month). It was only through an intervention by an advocacy and support organisation that that they were approved the higher rent level.

⁴⁴ Moreover, where the rent levels in an existing tenancy are higher than new rent limits introduced subsequent to the tenancy commencing (and where the landlord has not agreed to a reduction in the rent) an exception can be made for a period of 13 weeks.

⁴⁵ SWA Circular No. 21/11, Rent Supplement – Maximum Rent Levels. 22 December 2011

⁴⁶ The Homeless Person's Unit in Castle Street continues to provide payments under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme for women and families.

*They were trying to say no to us because it is €775 for us here. This place is €820 and because I am [seven months] pregnant, the [support worker] fought my corner to say that I should get the €820⁴⁷, so I think that that is the only reason why we got it. **Peter and Sarah***

The couple were also the only people interviewed as part of this research who were successful in negotiating down the asking price for their rent, which was originally €850 per month. As the rent limit is €825 for a couple and two children, the landlord reduced the rent by €30 per month. However, they were clear that if the landlord had not agreed, they would have paid the additional €30 per month themselves as a top-up.

In both of these instances, the interviewees were staying in emergency accommodation until being granted the exemption or period of grace.

3.2.3 Discretion at local level

For some people interviewed, there was a variation in responses from CWOs. According to Imogen, she was advised by a friend to move to a different area, as the CWO there was more supportive and flexible.

*[A friend] said that I should move to [another area in Dublin city] as the CWO there is brilliant. So I was in [another area of Dublin city] where they are by the book, they say no every time. **Imogen***

The experience of organisations working with people who are homeless found that the maximum rent levels were exceeded only in very rare circumstances. In these instances, significant advocacy and interventions were made by support organisations. The case was argued that the cost to the State of emergency accommodation far exceeds the cost of the Rent Supplement required in order to sustain a tenancy. In the experience of two people interviewed in this research, representations by support organisations led to the original decision of the CWO being reversed, and accommodation was secured above the rent limit that applied to the tenants at the time of securing accommodation.

No other interviewees were aware that they could seek an increase in the maximum rent levels, even though they were homeless at the time of seeking private rented accommodation and had experienced significant difficulty in securing private rented accommodation.

In the case of Imogen, who was in hospital at the time of interview, her support worker was planning to seek agreement that the rent limit could be increased, if required on securing accommodation.

⁴⁷ The rent limit for a couple and two children.

3.2.4 Indebtedness and arrears

Indebtedness was a significant issue facing some of the interviewees. Some of this arose from previous circumstances, and in some cases interviewees had loans that they had incurred, including loans from family members, credit unions, etc. They were uncertain as to how – and when – these loans could be repaid. Úna had taken out a loan to pay for a deposit in her new accommodation – her previous landlord had not repaid her deposit when she left, and while her case was being pursued with the PRTB, she could not receive a second deposit from the CWO towards her rent. She was also paying a €50 monthly top-up on her rent, from her disability allowance payment. She described how she sourced her new deposit:

I had to borrow it. I'm €600 in debt, I sold my dryer and I sold my coffee table and I borrowed the rest from my family. Úna

Tara was in the process of applying for Rent Supplement, but had already moved into her accommodation, and was paying a top-up of €50 per month in addition to her weekly payment of €30. She received €100 per week in jobseeker payments (at a lower rate as she was under 20 years of age).

Some interviewees spoke of a reliance on the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul as a means of making ends meet, particularly as a result of paying top-ups:

I have to call the Vincent de Paul to come out to us and then you'd get maybe €20 or €30 voucher to get groceries that day and then you would have to think about the following week. You have to pay the same again out of your payments as you did last week, and then ESB, TV License. Valerie

According to support organisations, there are a number of young homeless people who have left home and have no opportunity of getting single accommodation as the rent levels are too high and social welfare payments are too low - 18-24 year olds are in receipt of a reduced jobseekers allowance. As a result young people are staying in emergency accommodation, which is a major concern for homeless service providers. Two of the interviewees in this research were aged under 20 years, and were in receipt of a reduced jobseekers allowance.

As a result of paying top-ups on rent, suspensions or difficulties with Rent Supplement payments, three of those interviewed stated that they were in arrears – two were currently homeless, and one had been served a notice to quit. In two cases, arrears was a reason contributing to their experience of homelessness.

3.3 CHANGES IN THE APPLICATION PROCESS FOR RENT SUPPLEMENT

3.3.1 Centralised Rent Supplement application

Other recent changes in the application process for Rent Supplement includes a centralised application process whereby a number of 'Central Rent Units' covering different geographic areas assess each application. At present, Central Rent Units cover

areas of Dublin 15, Dublin 24, parts of Dublin city, Cavan, Monaghan, Wicklow, Waterford and Kildare.

One couple, Niall and Josephine, lived in an area covered by a Central Rent Unit and had found the system very hard to engage with. One reason was because they could not speak to someone about their application - instead they had been sent a package which included the application form. When they tried to call the Unit for assistance, they had difficulties getting through by phone.

Anytime you call them you have to wait on the phone like one hour maybe, and then last time we said we will be homeless and they just said 'we can't help you' and they just haven't got back to us.

Niall and Josephine

According to Niall and Josephine, there was a cost associated with this:

Then [as a result of being on hold] €20 is gone...it is freephone from a landline. We don't have a landline, if you have a mobile it's terrible and we were once waiting 45 minutes on the line. And when they answer they talk to us less than one minute...we went to the Citizen's Information [Centre]. One girl was very nice, tried to help, she called the office but she waited 55 minutes nobody answered.

*You need to talk to somebody to explain why, how. If you send letters, nobody answers. **Niall and Josephine***

Subsequent to this interview, the Minister for Social Protection has confirmed that the free-phone has been replaced with a Lo-call number in the Dublin 15 area.⁴⁸

This experience has been mirrored by support organisations interviewed as part of this research. Issues and difficulties identified by support organisations included: delays in processing applications, difficulties in getting through by telephone, lack of local knowledge on the part of the individuals dealing with applications, and the lack of a single contact person to discuss applications with. It was also noted that some applicants may have literacy difficulties and are in need of support in making their application. This need exists for Irish applicants and applicants from other countries.

According to the Peter McVerry Trust, in the past the local CWO would be able to process the application and get the deposit sorted in a couple of days. In the centralised areas, there have been instances of delays in getting applications processed, leading to the landlord withdrawing the accommodation and individuals becoming homeless again.

Difficulties in getting through to the telephone number is another problem reported by support organisations, whose experience is that this can become a serious issue if a landlord is looking for a clarification on an element of someone's application.

⁴⁸ Minister Joan Burton T.D., Response to Parliamentary Question (no. 637), Tuesday 18 September 2012

People have lost opportunities for accommodation due to these delays. It has been the experience of some that applications can take 2 to 3 weeks for a decision, which is not realistic or sufficient if attempting to secure private rented sector accommodation.

3.3.2 Proof of ownership

Proof of ownership is now required from the landlord as part of the application process for Rent Supplement. For one interviewee, the delay in getting proof of ownership from the landlord after the tenant had already moved into the accommodation resulted in a suspension of Rent Supplement payments from the DoSP.

In Imogen's case, a number of issues resulted in her becoming homeless, including falling into arrears with the landlord. Part of the reason for her falling into arrears was a request from her CWO to obtain proof of ownership of the landlord owning the property (subsequent to moving into her accommodation). She was awaiting this information from the landlord's agent, and after a period of time, her Rent Supplement payments were suspended for a period of six weeks. However, the delay in providing proof of ownership was on the part of the landlord, the ultimate beneficiary of the Rent Supplement payment, yet the tenant (in not providing the proof of ownership to the CWO) had to broker the arrangement from both parties.

*I was told that 'you're not getting any cheques until we have proof of ownership', and I said 'but you haven't asked for it for months and months, what is going on?' **Imogen***

Ultimately, the suspension of Rent Supplement payments to the tenant exacerbated a rental arrears situation and led to Imogen being evicted by the landlord. She had already fallen into arrears as a result of difficulties in paying a substantial top-up payment.

As Rent Supplement is not paid directly to the landlord, failure by the landlord to fulfil a requirement laid down by Rent Supplement impacts on the tenant's ability to pay their rent. What should ultimately be an issue between the DoSP and the landlord, ends up being mediated by the tenant, and in the case above can become a factor in the loss of accommodation.

According to support organisations consulted, the requirement for a proof of ownership further delays an application for Rent Supplement and has an adverse impact on the willingness of landlords to provide the accommodation to Rent Supplement recipients. According to the Peter McVerry Trust, this requirement has resulted in instances where the application process has slowed the process down by 10 days.

3.4 ACCESS TO ACCOMMODATION FOR RENT SUPPLEMENT CLAIMANTS

An underlying feature of the interviews was the general lack of private rented accommodation, for reasons of cost, but also because of other aspects of the Rent Supplement system. For those interviewed, and in particular those who were sourcing accommodation independently without the support of a support organisation, they reported significant difficulties in having Rent Supplement accepted by landlords or

letting agents. In some instances, this was only established during the viewing, and it was the opinion of one woman interviewed that:

*They don't tell you that they won't accept rent allowance until they see what kind of response they get from the ad. **Tara***

For Niall and Josephine, in most instances, they do not get a chance to view a property because the landlord does not accept Rent Supplement:

*If you find ten houses, you will find two that will accept rent allowance and eight that won't accept rent allowance...but even more now, because nearly all of them won't accept rent allowance. **Niall and Josephine***

3.4.1 Payment in arrears

Niall and Josephine have viewed at least ten properties, all of which they state the landlords/letting agents knew that they would be applying for Rent Supplement, but heard nothing back. As to why this might be the case, they reasoned that:

*Maybe people have cash [pay upfront]. **Niall and Josephine***

Stephen has been homeless for a number of years - initially because he was not entitled to Rent Supplement as he was not habitually resident, but now because he cannot secure private rented sector accommodation. For about five months he has been looking for accommodation, but has been unsuccessful and is currently staying on the floor in friends' apartments. He believes that his difficulty in finding accommodation is due to the fact that most landlords will not accept Rent Supplement payments. Of those that do accept Rent Supplement, the asking price for accommodation for a single person is above the rent limit. For a single person in Dublin city, the rent limit is €475, but in Stephen's experience, rents for single people are upwards of €500 per month. Another barrier to Stephen accessing accommodation is his inability to pay deposits and monthly rent when securing accommodation:

They always ask you for the rent and the deposit upfront and when you tell them 'I don't have this money', and they are like 'OK, borrow from your friends', but I cannot borrow the amount from my friends.

*They do not want to wait three, four or six weeks, they always want the money straight away, as soon as they can get it. **Stephen***

The Department of Social Protection has confirmed that in 2012, 52 Exceptional Needs Payments were issued for the purpose of paying rent payments in advance (up to

September 2012). The figure for 2011 was 52. This annual figure is almost one-third the number of Exceptional Needs Payments for this purpose made in 2008.⁴⁹

3.4.2 Discrimination

Where landlords do accept Rent Supplement, some people interviewed believed that if they were in a couple or had children, they were less likely to get the accommodation. Valerie spoke of her experience of being asked to pay a higher deposit because she was in a couple.

I was talking to a gentleman yesterday and he said that it is €250 for a deposit and [when I said] it was for me and my partner, he said 'oh no, sorry it would be €400 for a couple.' **Valerie**

Two of those interviewed were members of the Traveller community, and they believed that being a Traveller had an adverse affect on access to accommodation because of discrimination:

They just don't like the thought of having a Travellers in their community or renting a place to a Traveller...there is a lot of difficulties around that situation. **Valerie**

Another Traveller woman noted that when she mentioned her surname (which was associated with Travellers), the attitude of the landlord changed.

Unsurprisingly, the preference for applicants with cash over Rent Supplement applicants was also noted by service providers, who were of the opinion that Rent Supplement applicants are likely to get the accommodation that 'nobody else wants'. In the experience of one service in Focus Ireland, which has sourced private sector accommodation for 50 families since spring 2012, Tallaght and Clondalkin are the only two places on the southside of Dublin that families on Rent Supplement can secure accommodation.

According to advocacy and homeless support organisations, people are driven into poor accommodation, including bedsits, as a result of a lack of supply. In 2013, 'bedsits'⁵⁰ will become illegal. However, it was the view of some interviewees that this will not be enforced, as it is not in the interest of the State to further reduce supply of accommodation – regardless of its quality.

⁴⁹ Minister Joan Burton T.D., Response to Parliamentary Question (no. 638), Tuesday 18 September 2012

⁵⁰ Bedsits in this context means rooms with shared sanitary facilities, and where the bed and kitchen are in the same room.

4. The impact of changes in Rent Supplement – the views of landlords

In addition to interviews with people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness, a survey was undertaken with landlords and letting agents as part of this research. The sample was drawn from advertisements on Daft, and the survey was administered by two Housing Officers in Focus Ireland.

4.1.1 Profile of participants

27 individuals participated in the telephone survey – the majority were estate/letting agents (n=18, 64%), and a smaller number were landlords (n=10, 36%).⁵¹ All of the respondents were letting two-bed or family accommodation. The location of these units (within the greater Dublin and North Kildare areas) are outlined below:

Table 4.1 Location of properties

County	No. of interviewees
N. Wicklow	0
N.Kildare	1
Fingal	7
SDCC	7
DLR	1
Dublin city	7
Not specified	4

The majority of those interviewed accept Rent Supplement.

Table 4.2 Do you accept rent supplement?

Yes	16	59%
No	7	26%
Not decided/ depends	4	15%

Analysis of those that accept Rent Supplement reveals a higher proportion of landlords accepting Rent Supplement compared to letting agents. Of the 16 who accept Rent Supplement, 9 were landlords and 8 were letting agents.⁵² Therefore 9 out of 10 landlords surveyed accept Rent Supplement, compared to 8 out of 18 letting agents.

⁵¹ One respondent identified themselves as being both a letting agent and landlord.

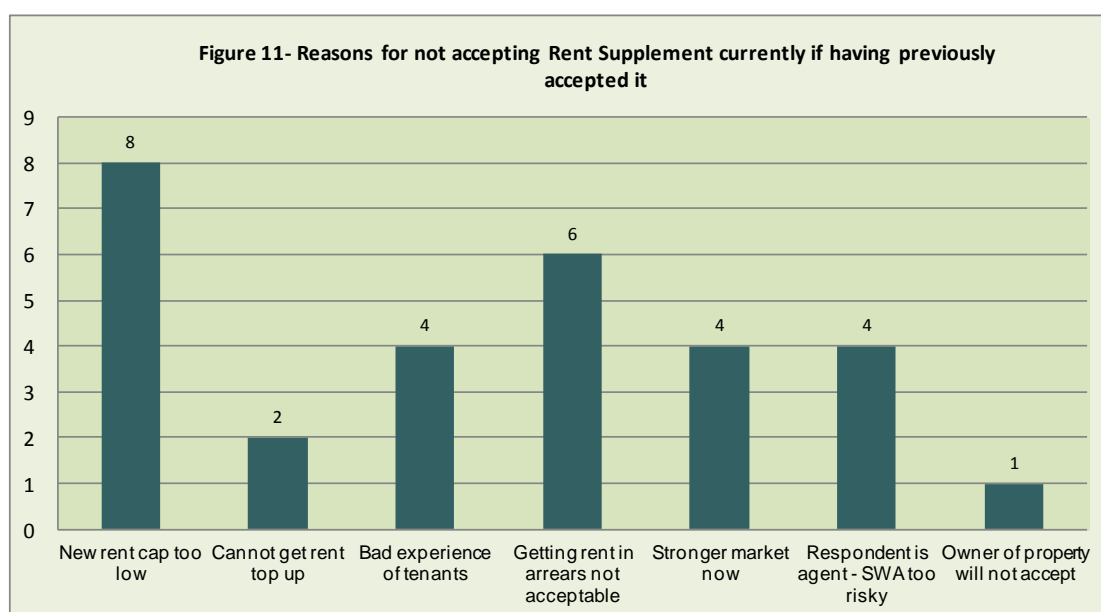
⁵² Included here is the individual who self-identified as both being a landlord and letting agent.

Of those that do accept or are considering accepting Rent Supplement (n=20), half accept (or would accept) Rent Supplement in arrears and just under half (n=8, 40%) require a top-up on the rent levels declared on the application for Rent Supplement. This is a surprising finding, and it could be assumed that the requirement for a top-up from the tenant would be under-reported. This is because the requirement for a top-up involves falsely declaring the actual rent level on the Rent Supplement application form.

Those who do not currently accept Rent Supplement (or have not yet made a decision as to whether they will) were asked whether they had previously accepted Rent Supplement. There were 11 landlords/ letting agents in this group. Of these, 7 had previously accepted Rent Supplement (64%).

The respondents were asked to state their reasons for not currently accepting Rent Supplement⁵³, and eight respondents answered this question. The most prevalent reason cited was that the 'rent cap' is too low.

Another reason was that accessing rent in arrears (as is the case with the Rent Supplement system) is not acceptable.



All respondents were asked whether recent changes in Rent Supplement had impacted on their decision to accept Rent Supplement, or had impacted on their tenancies. 19 respondents (76% of those who answered the question) reported that they had, while 6 (24%) said that they had not. Two respondents did not respond to this question.

The most frequently arising response for the changes in Rent Supplement impacting on their decision was that the rent limit itself was too low (10 responses), followed by fears and concerns that the rent limits could be reduced further (7 responses). Other responses included the concern that a reduction in the rent 'cap' places an undue burden

⁵³ Respondents were permitted to select as many options as they wished.

on the tenant (rent top-up) and the landlord (especially when imposed mid-way through a tenancy agreement), and the rent limit is exceeded by market rents available (6 responses).

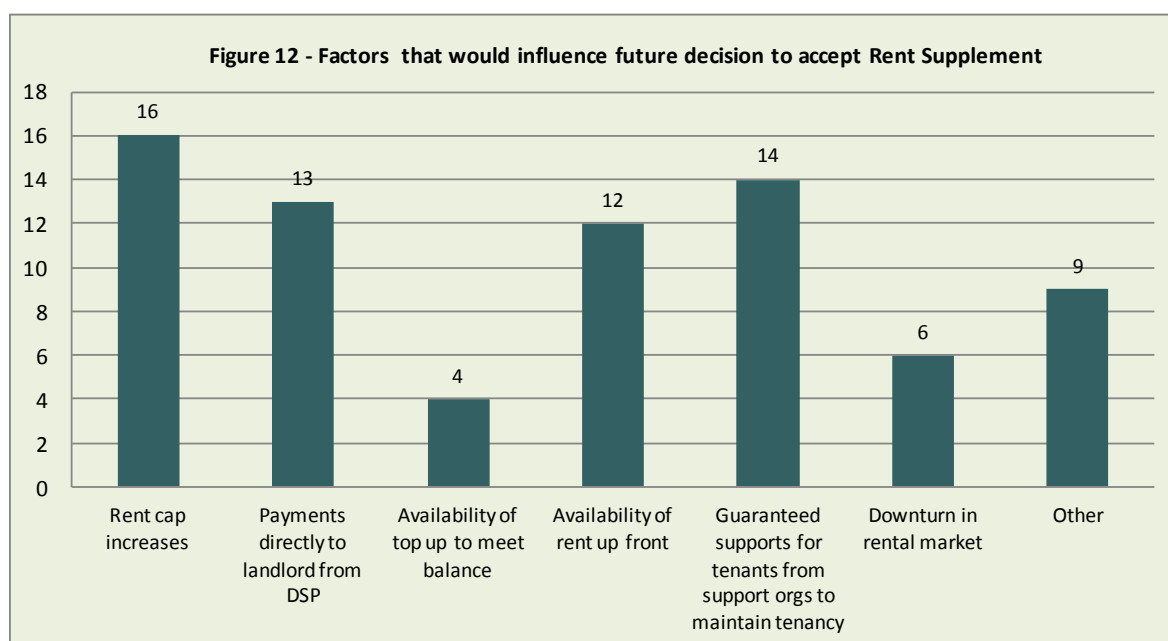
Further responses included that: there are delays in the process (1 response), tenants are high risk (1 response), and that Rent Supplement would not be accepted regardless of the rent limits (1 response).

Respondents were asked whether they would accept Rent Supplement in the future: four landlords/letting agents stated that they would, four stated that they would not, and the remaining 19 stated that it would depend (70% of all respondents).

As to what factors would influence their decision, rent cap increases was cited by 16 respondents (62%). The second most prevalent factor stated was the guarantee that tenants would receive supports from organisations to maintain their tenancies (14 responses). Further comments related to this issue included:

- *Tenant support would encourage more owners to be open to rent allowance.*
- *More supports in place [needed] for tenants.*

The third and fourth most prevalent factors were that payments would be made directly to the landlord from the DoSP and that Rent Supplement would be paid up front.



The survey respondents provided some additional comments on the system of Rent Supplement. One letting agent made the point that they would only offer poorer quality houses to Rent Supplement tenants, where they feel that they have no other options. Other issues included the fear for the landlord of loss of rental payments leading to mortgage difficulties:

- *Tenant portion should be deducted from source as arrears can build up.*
- *Strong rental market, does not have to deal with 'social welfare tenant' so won't (Letting agent based in affluent area, Dublin South East).*
- *Social stigma attached to rent allowance tenants. Fear of breakdown in tenancy and landlords at risk of mortgage arrears.*
- *Landlords are reluctant to take rent allowance in case of breakdown of payments could result in them missing a mortgage payment.*

The views of landlords and letting agents are strongly reflective of the experiences of tenants and homeless people interviewed, as well as of support organisations. In a submission made to the researchers, the Irish Property Owners Association (IPOA) stated that:

*Property owners do not trust Government on the payment of Rent Supplement benefits and in many cases will not take rent supplement tenants. **Irish Property Owners Association (IPOA)***

5. Discussion and recommendations

The interviews undertaken with individuals and families were facilitated by homeless services, and so they represent a sample which may not be representative of the wider population. In most instances, people had either been homeless and had secured accommodation, or were at risk of homelessness. Nonetheless, there was consistency in the experiences and views of tenants, landlords and organisations consulted. In this section, a brief overview of some of the key findings is provided.

5.1 REDUCED RENT LIMITS, THEIR EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPACTS

The findings of the interviews and the views of service providers suggest that the intention of the DoSP's rent review 'to ensure that maximum rent limits are placed at appropriate price points to create further downward pressure on the market' may not have been achieved.

There are a number of possible reasons for this.

First, the findings of this research indicate that the maximum rent levels are not in fact consistent with the rent levels disclosed in applications for Rent Supplement. There is a willingness and expectation of tenants to pay a further contribution to their rent, in the form of a rent 'top-up'.

The prevalence of top-up payments arising in the interviews is consistent with the responses of landlords and support organisations consulted as part of this research. It also suggests that the impact of Rent Supplement changes may be hidden in the short-term. As it is the tenant in many cases who appears to be meeting the costs of Rent Supplement changes, indebtedness, arrears and ultimately loss of accommodation is likely to arise.

Second, the provisions under the changes to rent limits in 2012 provide that each individual tenant is required to renegotiate new rent levels with their landlord. The bargaining power of an individual tenant is weak for obvious reasons: the poor quality of accommodation, difficulties in accessing accommodation that accepts Rent Supplement, and the reduced supply for private rented sector accommodation. It is therefore unrealistic to expect tenants, with little or no leverage, to affect changes in the rental market by negotiating on an individual basis.

It should also be noted that the mid-lease change in maximum rent levels constitutes a breach of tenancy agreement, and so immediately places the tenant in a vulnerable position whereby they could possibly lose their accommodation.

Finally, tenants may pay top-ups because they believe that they cannot find alternative accommodation within the rent limits. The DoSP appears confident that the lowered rent caps are appropriate to the market – tenants should therefore secure a lower rent in their current home, or find new and cheaper accommodation. But it is not clear what a

tenant who cannot find cheaper accommodation is to do. Faced with this reality, tenants have little option but to pay a top-up.

The system is geared to a conspiracy of silence on this issue. Neither tenant, landlord nor CWO can benefit from uncovering payment of a top-up. Landlords lose a tenant, and some may not be declaring top-up income for tax, and may therefore face a further penalty. CWO's risk looking less than thorough in the exercise of their duties. But the tenant faces the biggest penalty – the loss of their home.

As a result, it is not surprising that payment of top-ups is so prevalent.

The extent of indebtedness and arrears arising from this situation is probably underestimated in this research, given that many of those interviewed had either recently secured accommodation, or were still seeking it.

Recommendations

1. Rent limits should be set in a more transparent manner, through an independent process, and should better reflect both actual market rents and urban and rural variations. The Department of Social Protection's primary aim is to meet the welfare needs of its clients, and any attempt to influence the level of market rents should be balanced against this objective.
2. There should be no further reductions in Rent Supplement rent limits pending this system being implemented.
3. An alternative to tenants negotiating for rent reductions directly with their landlords should be found. Tenants should not be required to break the terms of their lease and renegotiate a new rent limit, until the annual rent review in their tenancy agreement arises. Where it is clear that every effort to secure accommodation has been undertaken by the Rent Supplement recipient, a local review of appropriate accommodation available should be undertaken by the Community Welfare Service and the recipient should be provided Rent Supplement at a level that will secure private rented accommodation.

5.2 SYSTEMS OF PAYMENT

Advocacy and housing support organisations, as well as landlord representative groups, have suggested for many years that Rent Supplement payments should be made directly to the landlord. The Department of Social Protection argues that the arrangement in providing Rent Supplement is between the claimant and the Department (and not the Department and the landlord). In some circumstances a requirement for the landlord to meet conditions set by the Department (for example, to demonstrate proof of ownership) is a condition that the landlord must meet, but is mediated by the tenant. In the case of one interviewee, the failure of the landlord to meet a requirement imposed by the Department (but mediated by the tenant) ultimately led to an eviction order.

If this condition was imposed directly on the landlord by the Department, and the Rent Supplement payment was made directly to the landlord, any delays in meeting this requirement would not have to be dealt with by the tenant.

It is inconsistent for the DoSP to assert that it is a significant actor in the private rented sector with the capacity to set market rents, yet has no engagement with landlords in order to make payments directly to landlords who accept Rent Supplement. The steps taken by the DoSP to ensure landlord compliance with Rent Supplement Scheme requirements (e.g. demonstrating ownership and tax compliance) make it clear that a relationship does exist.

Recommendation

4. Rent Supplement payments should be paid directly to landlords by the Department of Social Protection by default. In order to maintain the integrity of the contract between the tenant and the landlord, it should only be paid by the tenant where they specifically request this option.

5.3 SETTING AND ESTABLISHING THE MARKET RATES

The Department of Social Protection in its rent reviews has analysed the market rates for rent from a range of sources, and asserts that the rent limits should be consistent with 40th percentile market rates of rents. It argues that average rent rates include top-end private rented sector accommodation, which is not necessarily within the intended range of Rent Supplement payments. While this argument may make some sense in Dublin, in many parts of the country there would not be the same spread of rented accommodation.

However, the rent limits are applied to a relatively wide geographic area, and while the rent limits for some areas may meet the 40th percentile argument, it may mean that households have to move from a city area to a rural one, or from one area of a city to another. But such a move may mean that children are living far away from their school, or that a vulnerable tenant has to move away from their support network. For example, the rent limits for Cork county (including Cork city area) covers a very wide geographic area, and it is not reasonable that households, in particular those with children, may be able to move to areas which meet the rent limit requirements. The alternative is to pay a top-up in addition to the minimum tenant contribution. It should be noted that all four individuals interviewed in Galway city were either currently paying or had previously paid a top-up to their landlord.

Recommendations

5. Consideration should be given for greater delineation of county areas for the purpose of setting rent limits, to better account for fluctuations in average rents in city and county areas. In areas where there are significant fluctuations, this could result in savings to the State.

6. Given reports of increases in rents since the start of 2012, the rent limits review to be undertaken by the Department of Social Protection should take place sooner than June 2013 (which is the date the next review is due to take place).

5.4 BUREAUCRACY

The centralised application process for Rent Supplement, which is in operation in a number of areas, has resulted in reported difficulties for Rent Supplement applicants. According to homeless and housing support organisations, the relatively long time taken for processing an application (compared with a localised application process) has contributed to a tenant losing out on accommodation. Moreover, new provisions in the application process (e.g. requiring a landlord to provide proof of ownership), and the lack of support or liaison for individuals from Central Rent Units, will further add to the difficulties for those in moving from homeless accommodation to the private rented sector.

Recommendations

7. Until the Rent Supplement system switches to local authorities, there should be a re-introduction of the free-phone number for all callers to Central Rent Units. Case officers should be allocated to specific geographic areas, to enable applicants to have a consistent point of contact to discuss their applications.
8. Data should be recorded on the time taken to approve Rent Supplement applications, whether in a local office or in a Central Rent Unit in order to enable comparisons.
9. As is currently required, but not implemented, all cases where Community Welfare Officers use the discretion available to them to approve Rent Supplement applications at rents exceeding the rent limits should be recorded to contribute to the evidence base for effective policy. This data on the Rent Supplement Scheme should be published in a readily accessible format on a regular basis. Homeless organisations should record the number of households who have been allocated and refused an exemption to the rent limits.

5.5 VALUE FOR MONEY

In 2011, the DoSP estimates that recent changes to the rent limits will save the State €22 million in reduced rent payments. However, the experience of two households in this research indicates that the implementation of the Rent Supplement system provides very poor value for money when families are maintained in emergency homeless accommodation, rather than being enabled to access private rented accommodation. In two cases, households with children who had been residing in homeless emergency accommodation, had found accommodation which was in excess of the maximum rent levels set and therefore had their application for Rent Supplement denied. It was only after a number of interventions by an advocacy and support organisation that this decision was overturned. Had these interventions not been made, and the households

had remained in emergency accommodation, total costs to the State would have been considerably higher.

Recommendation

10. New protocols should be devised in relation to the implementation of SWA Circular No. 21/11.⁵⁴ For people who are currently homeless for at least six months, local authorities should administer a new system of subsidising housing costs in the private rented sector. This should be designed to enable people who are currently homeless to access accommodation at a higher rent threshold than applies for Rent Supplement, and should incorporate a system to help people pay the initial deposit. This is line with the Government's current Housing Policy Statement, which endorses a 'Housing First' approach to homelessness, and would formalise the discretionary exceptions available under the Rent Supplement system.

5.6 ACCESS TO RENT SUPPLEMENT

An overarching theme of this research is the extent to which those who are eligible for Rent Supplement have difficulty in accessing and securing private rented accommodation. The landlord/letting agent survey points to some of the reasons as to why this is the case. The two main reasons for reluctance on the part of landlords/letting agents is: the presence of the rent 'cap', and not receiving rent and deposits upfront from tenants. It would appear that if the State continues to rely on the private rented sector for providing social housing, these fundamental issues will need to be addressed.

Recommendation

11. Payments of rental deposits and rents in advance should be provided for under the Rent Supplement Scheme, where applicants have been assessed as in need of social housing.

⁵⁴ This circular provides for exceptional circumstances where the maximum rent limit can be exceeded, for example, where there are special housing needs (including those who are homeless).

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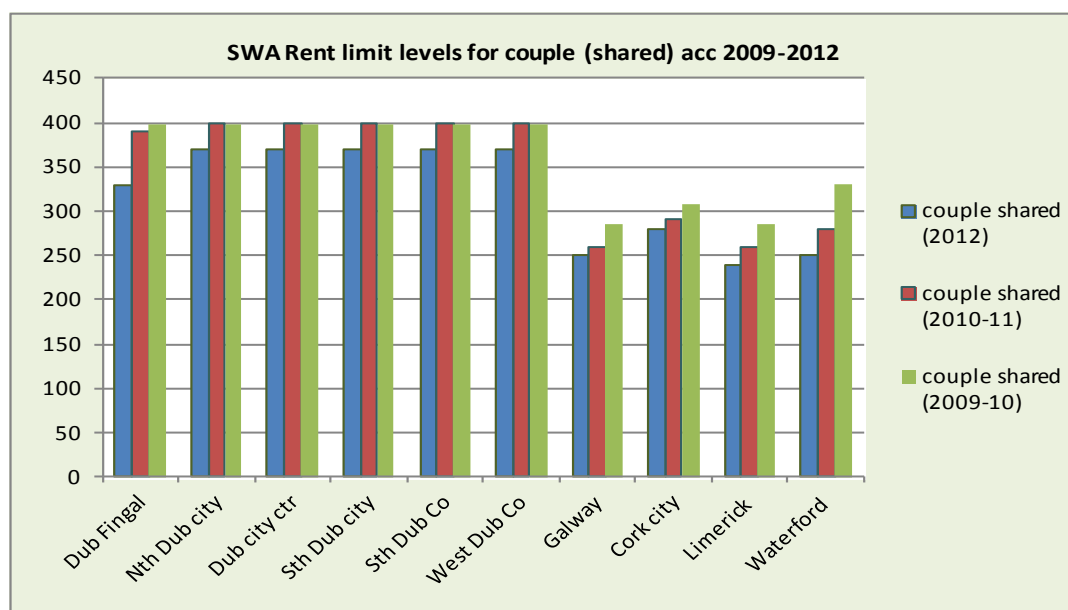
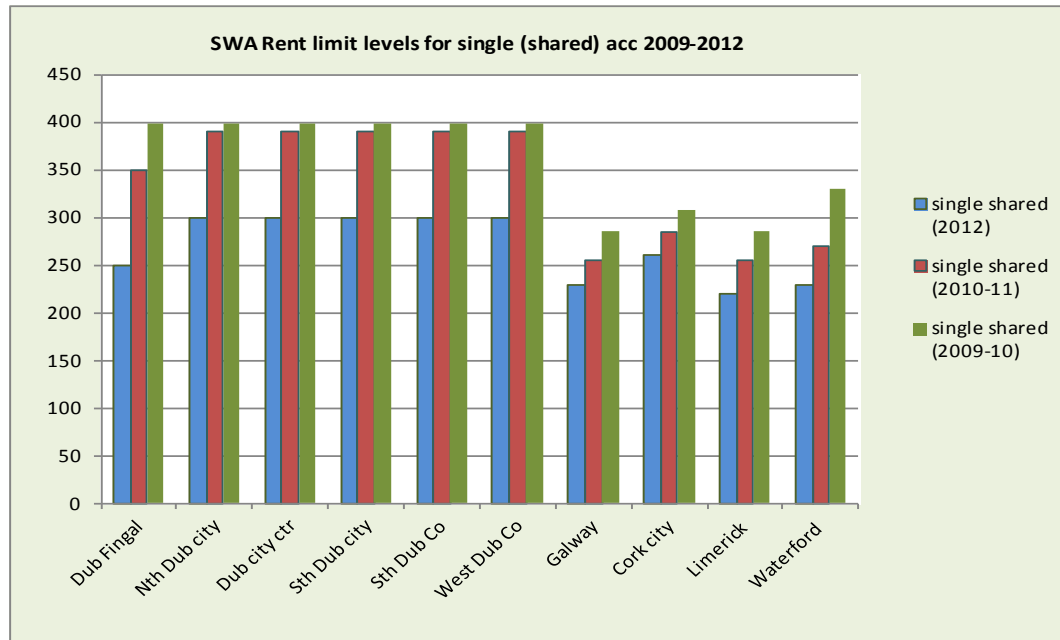
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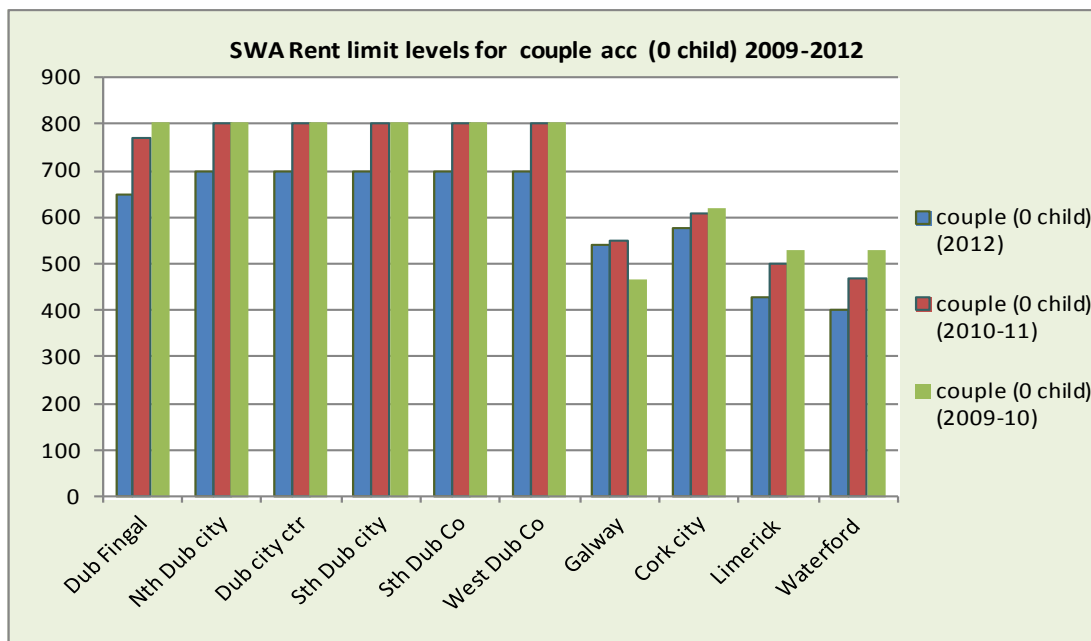
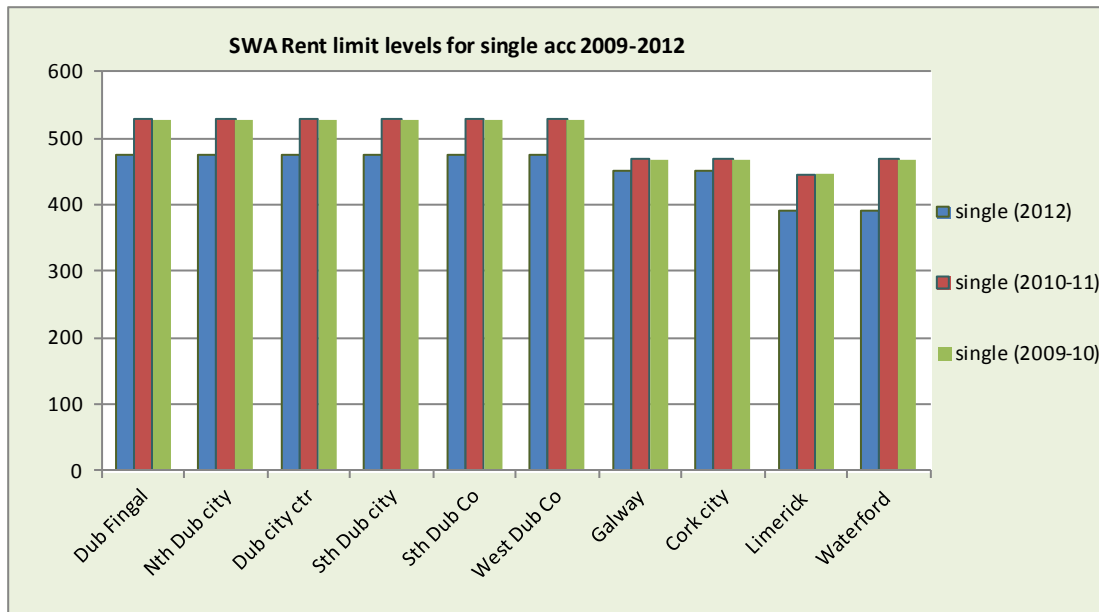
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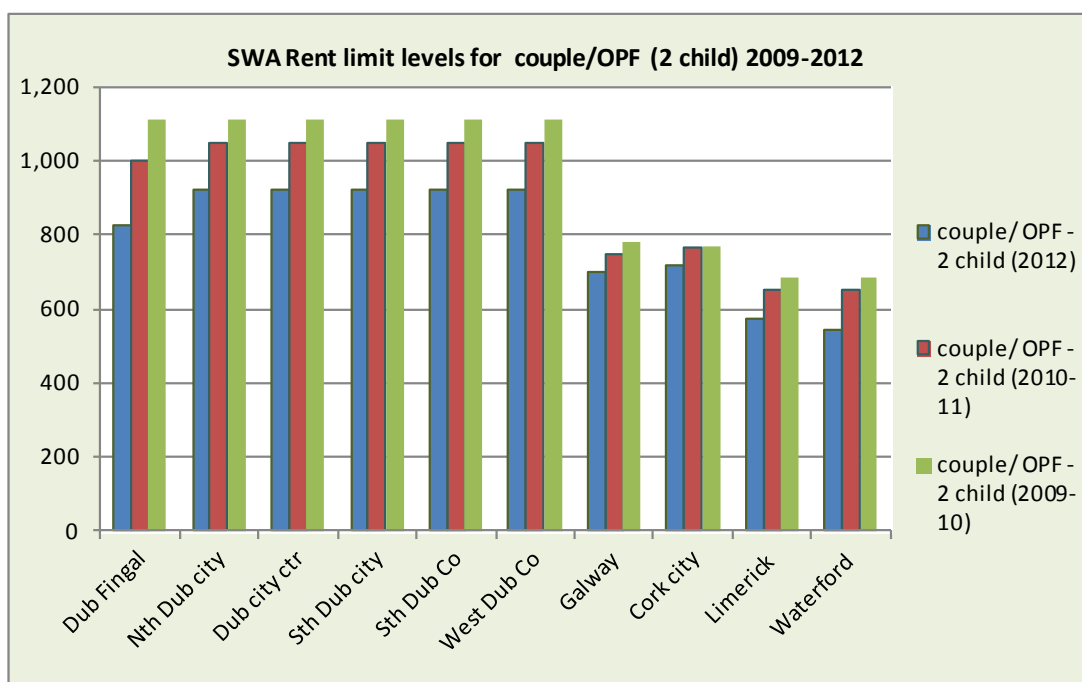
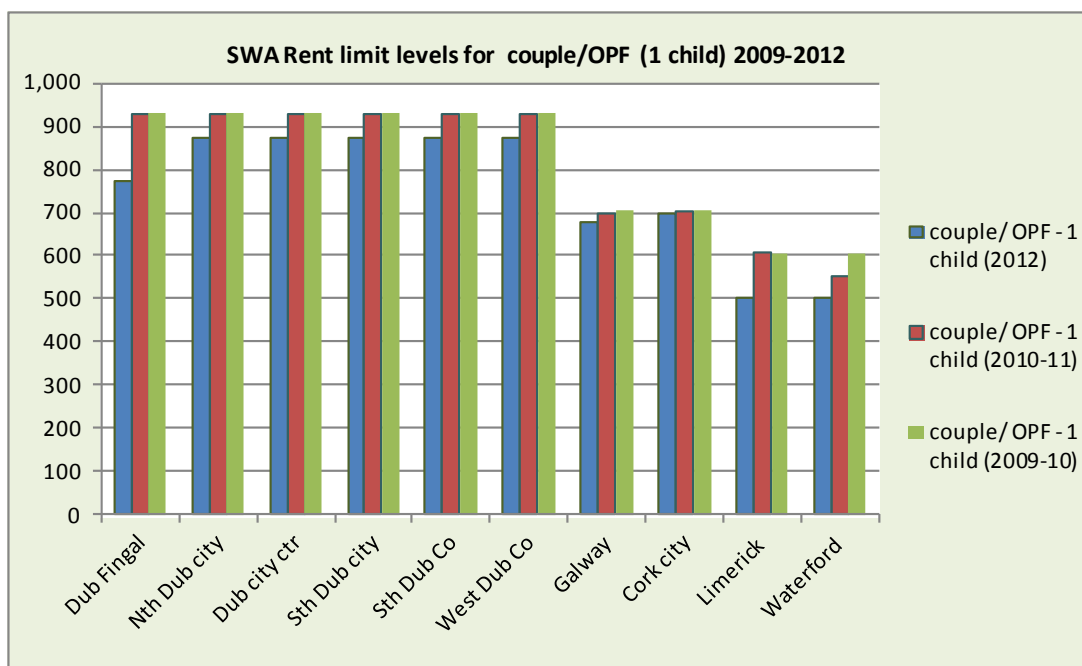
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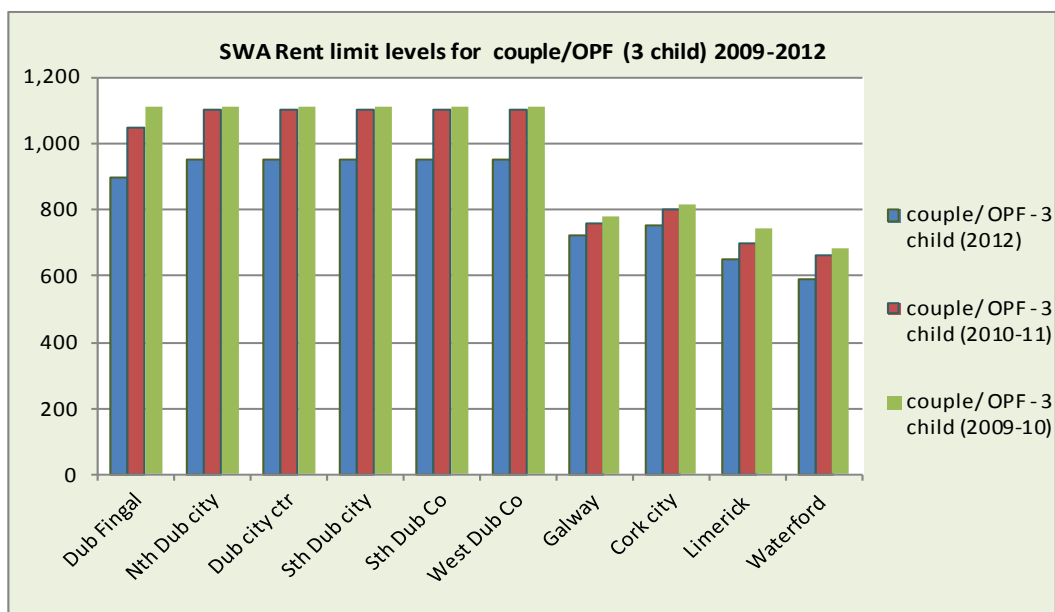
Appendices

APPENDIX 1: CHANGES IN RENT SUPPLEMENT RENT LIMITS FOR DIFFERENT ACCOMMODATION TYPES IN URBAN AREAS OF IRELAND

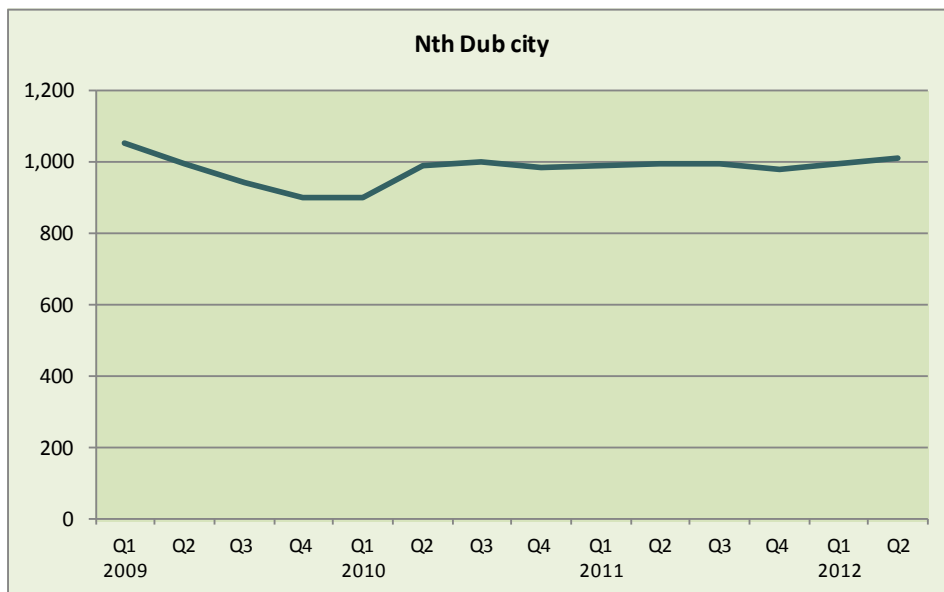
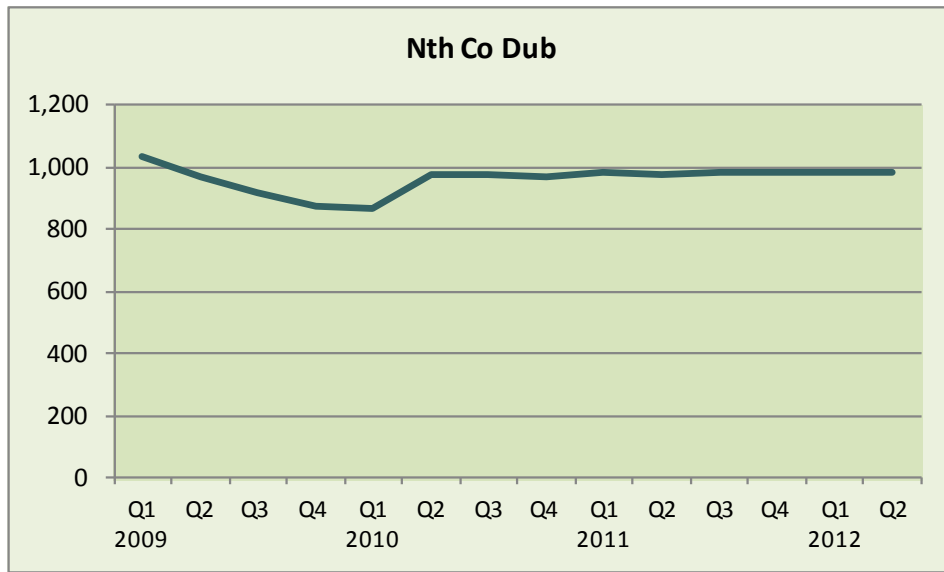


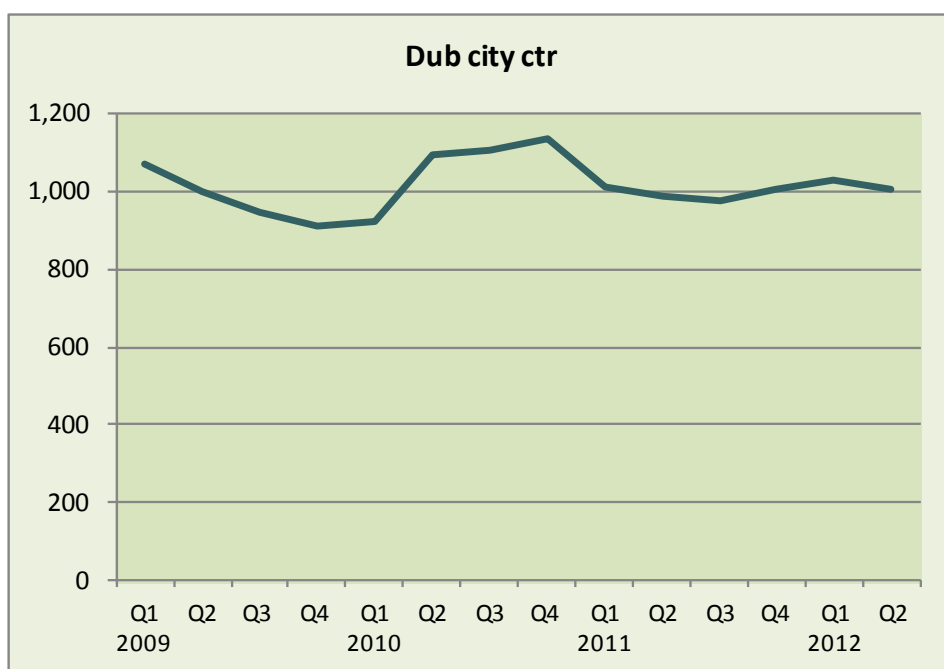
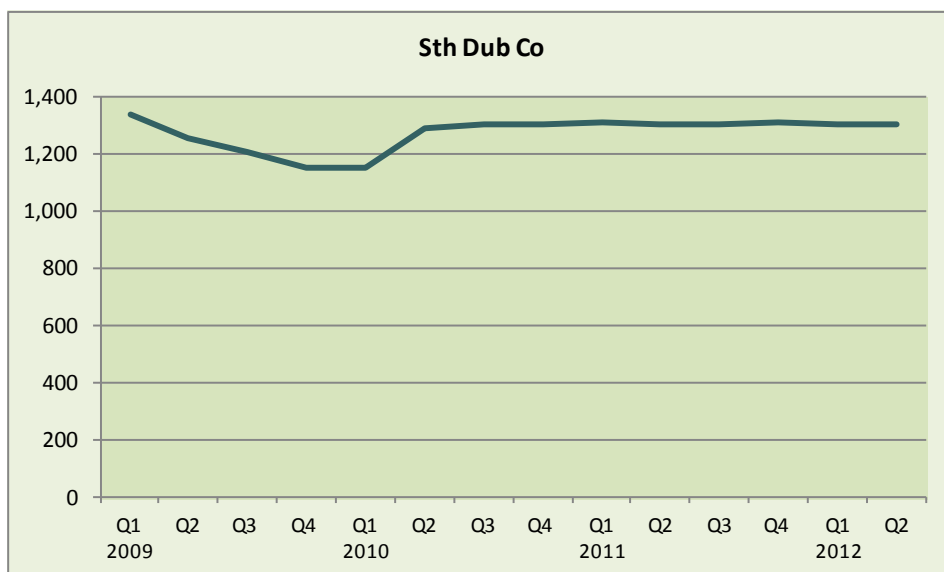


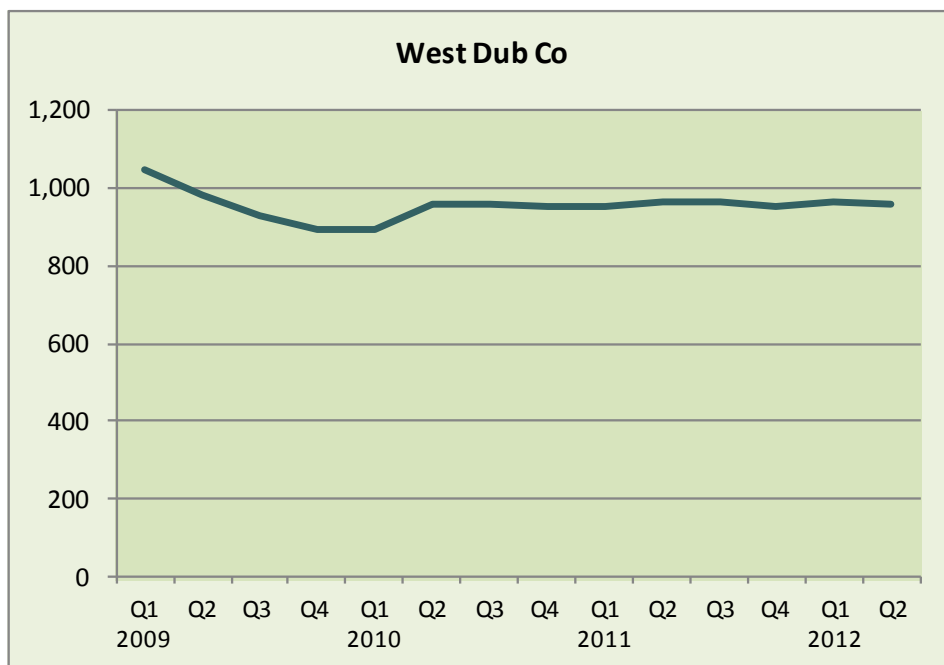
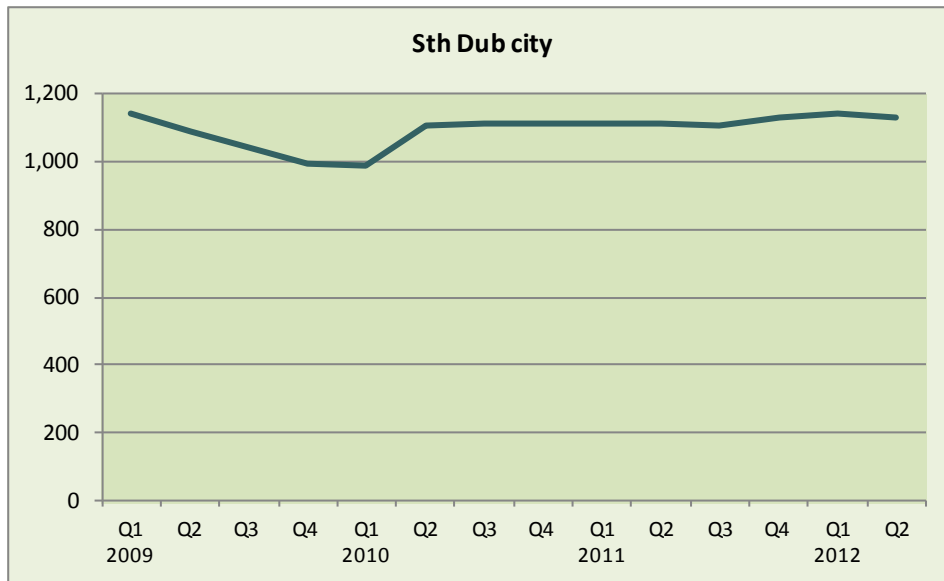


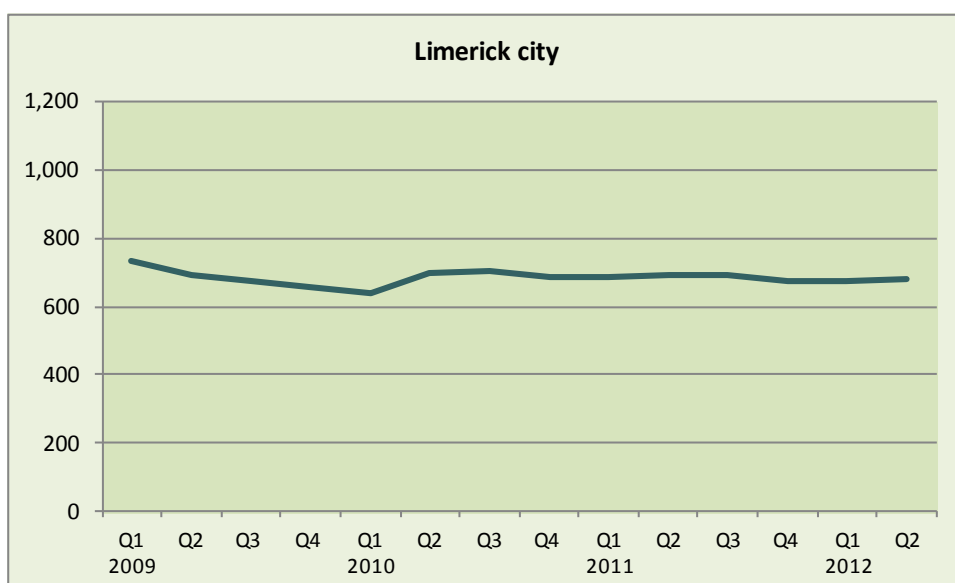
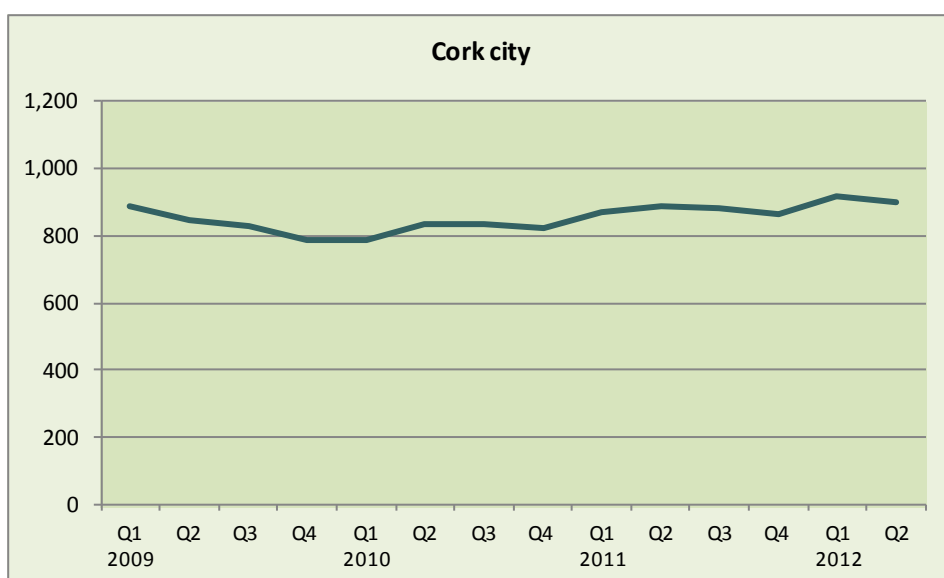
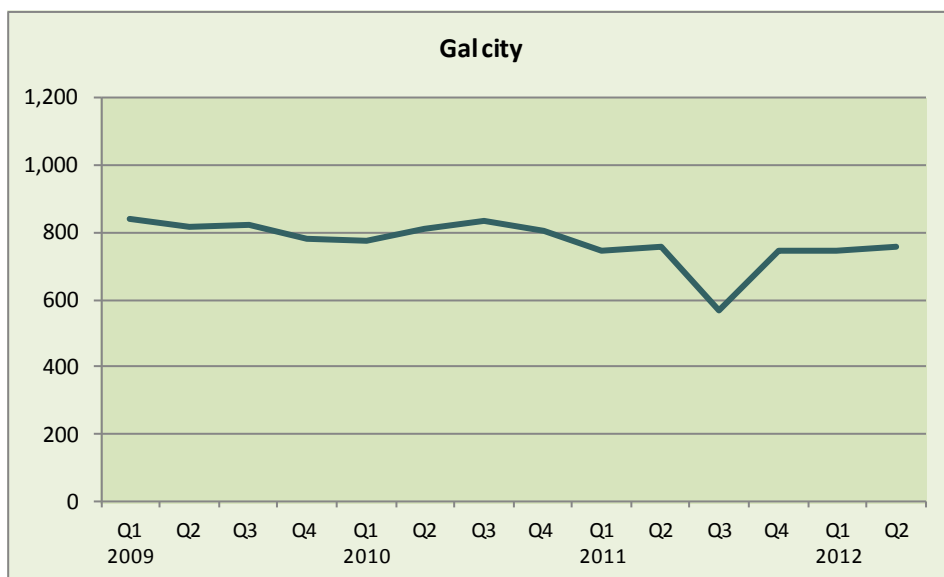


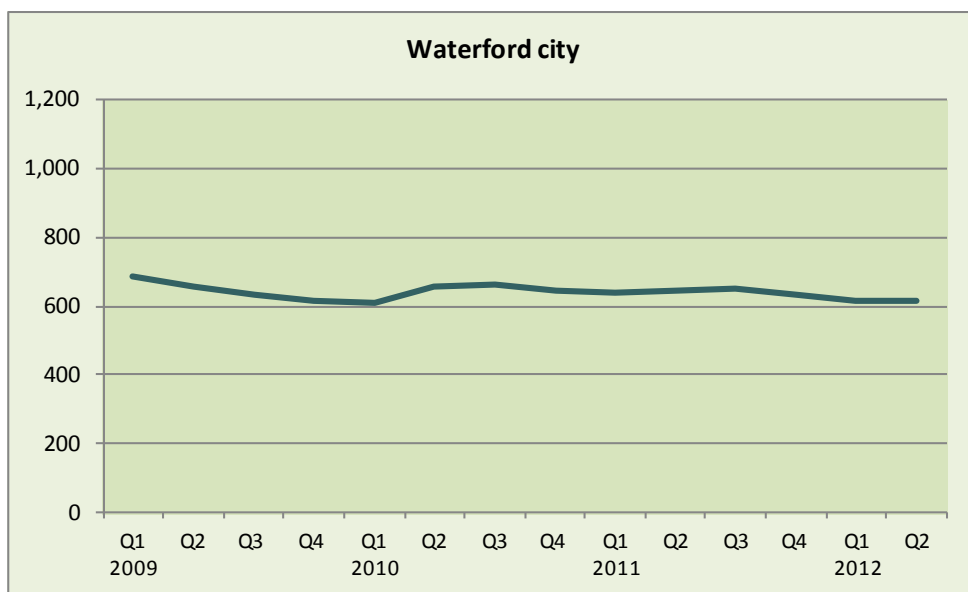
APPENDIX 2: CHANGES IN AVERAGE RENT LEVELS (DAFT DATA) 2009-2012











APPENDIX 3: MONTHLY RENT LIMITS (SUPPLEMENTARY WELFARE ALLOWANCE) 2009 – 2013

2012 -2013

	single shared (2012)	couple shared (2012)	single (2012)	couple (0 child) (2012)	couple/ OPF - 1 child (2012)	couple/ OPF - 2 child (2012)	couple/ OPF - 3 child (2012)
Dub Fingal	250	330	475	650	775	825	900
Nth Dub city	300	370	475	700	875	925	950
Dub city ctr	300	370	475	700	875	925	950
Sth Dub city	300	370	475	700	875	925	950
Sth Dub Co	300	370	475	700	875	925	950
West Dub Co	300	370	475	700	875	925	950
Galway	230	250	450	540	680	700	725
Cork city	260	280	450	575	700	715	750
Limerick	220	240	390	430	500	575	650
Waterford	230	250	390	400	500	540	590

2010-2011

	single shared (2010-11)	couple shared (2010-11)	single (2010- 11)	couple (0 child) (2010- 11)	couple/ OPF - 1 child (2010- 11)	couple/ OPF - 2 child (2010- 11)	couple/ OPF - 3 child (2010- 11)
Dub Fingal	350	390	529	770	930	1,000	1,050
Nth Dub city	390	400	529	800	930	1,050	1,100
Dub city ctr	390	400	529	800	930	1,050	1,100
Sth Dub city	390	400	529	800	930	1,050	1,100
Sth Dub Co	390	400	529	800	930	1,050	1,100
West Dub Co	390	400	529	800	930	1,050	1,100
Galway	255	260	468	550	700	750	760
Cork city	285	290	468	610	705	765	800
Limerick	255	260	446	500	605	650	700
Waterford	270	280	468	470	550	650	660

2009-2010

	single shared (2009-10)	couple shared (2009-10)	single (2009- 10)	couple (0 child) (2009- 10)	couple/ OPF - 1 child (2009- 10)	couple/ OPF - 2 child (2009- 10)	couple/ OPF - 3 child (2009- 10)
Dub Fingal	399	399	529	806	930	1,110	1,110
Nth Dub city	399	399	529	806	930	1,110	1,110
Dub city ctr	399	399	529	806	930	1,110	1,110
Sth Dub city	399	399	529	806	930	1,110	1,110
Sth Dub Co	399	399	529	806	930	1,110	1,110
West Dub Co	399	399	529	806	930	1,110	1,110
Galway	286	286	468	468	706	780	780
Cork city	308	308	468	620	706	767	819
Limerick	286	286	446	529	607	685	745
Waterford	329	329	468	529	607	685	685

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In order to protect the identity and
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